# WCC

WRITERS: CRAFT & CONTEXT

*Vol. 2 | No. 1*




LISA GROSSMAN

# Editors' Introduction

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When we titled our journal *Writers: Craft and Context*, we envisioned the many and varied "crafts" our contributors would bring to our pages. As editors, we continue to welcome (sometimes tentative) queries from (sometimes timid) authors who are sending us work representative of the wide range of genre and content we value and published in our inaugural issue. In this second issue (V2n1), we emphasize the concept of *context.* So much has happened since we published the first issue (V1n1) of *Writers: Craft & Context* in August 2020. We've lived through a harrowing presidential-election season along with troubling developments in overlapping pandemics. We have a long road ahead and unprecedented challenges to face. Nevertheless, the cover image by artist Lisa Grossman captures the hopefulness we feel in this moment. Our readers, writers, and reviewers give us hope. Indeed, our writers (in this issue and our inaugural issue) have spoken.

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.

Our 2020-2021 context has certainly provided time and space for writers to critically self-reflect on aspects of identities, learning and living environments, and depths of emotion such as grief, anger, frustration, compassion, and solidarity. In this issue you'll find Amy Robillard's "Good Girl," a personal narrative detailing a situation involving the author's dog. The writer, who is also a writing teacher, reflects on words and language and their ability to "touch" others during a global pandemic in which touch is highly discouraged. Interspersed with critical self-reflection on experiences with domestic violence and abuse, with additional reflection on dog ownership and companionship, the author writes her way through past and present trauma toward a perspective that engages the concept and question of empathy.

In "My Year of Writing Through Diasporic Melancholy," Shui-yin Sharon Yam reflects on her changing relationship to writing as she uses it to navigate the trauma, grief, and rage she experiences straddling complex geopolitics across two continents. With regard to context, Yam writes, "The dissonance I felt then as a diasporic Hongkonger would only intensify over the next few months into 2020. Because of the 12-hour time difference between Hong Kong and Lexington, I woke up to live footage of protests and police brutality on my phone." Specifically, Yam explores how her experience with writing shifts as she has moved from writing primarily for academic purposes to writing for a more public transnational audience.

Gabrielle Kelenyi offers "For the Love of Writing: My Writing Process as a Form of Self-Love," an autoethnographic-reflection essay in which she theorizes her writing process as an act of self-love through an examination of what makes writing both "easy and hard" for her as an author. Kelenyi argues we should teach writing *as or for* love so as to avoid (re)producing systemic inequities in literacy education. As such, Kelenyi hopes her autoethnographic reflection will inform readers of her lived experience as

a writer and, in so doing, share ways writing instruction in school contexts can help students develop individualized writing processes that help them love writing—even when it's hard.

Shelley Galliah's "Grieving While Dissertating" continues this issue's focus on context with an exploration of the embodied and the emotional. One reviewer commented, "As the COVID and other crises ramp up, this essay will be a balm to many. It offers a crucial perspective grounded in wrenching personal experiences . . . the author gives us all the means to reflect on graduate programs' exploitation of graduate students and the violence our programs can cause." This essay is mined from a deep concern about the normalization of depression in graduate school and the unhealthy workaholic culture of academia. As editors and reviewers, we feel this essay enriches our understanding of graduate student writers' ability to compose through grief and trauma, which is something we absolutely need to remain cognizant of, as the world, and our academic contexts, remains unable to recognize the issues facing the most vulnerable learners.

Continuing the thread of lived realities within the context of the academy, Alex Hanson contributes "Making Space for What Lies in the Interstices: The Composing Practices of Single Moms." In this essay, Hanson examines how composing processes are influenced by lived experiences and material circumstances of single moms. Given this journal's pointed focus on context, the following comment from reviewer Nancy Alverez is illuminating, as it demonstrates how Hanson's piece surfaces and reaches across resonant contexts:

> As I sit at my desk typing up this review, my 6-year-old is rolling around on a stability ball, pulling on my chair as he rolls back and forth, while occasionally rolling close enough to me to dig his elbows on my lap as he looks to see what I'm writing. The juggling it took to find the free time to write this review is something only another mother can truly understand and I love how your piece really outlines the writing experiences of all of these different mothers, including yourself. The kid(s) wants, demands, and needs the attention of his/her/their mother, but we have so much to do. All of the time. It doesn't stop. So, as my kid continues to roll around behind me while watching an episode of *Sesame Street*, here I am, sitting in solidarity with all of the other mothers who schedule time to reduce focus on/ignore their kid(s) to write.

Employing testimonio, a methodology inspired by the Latina Feminist Group, Hanson blends research and creative nonfiction, drawing on her own experience with scholarly composing as a single mom to tell the stories of writers across disciplines, academic ranks, geographic locations, and single-mom identities. In doing so, she advocates for transforming support structures and policies in higher education to be inclusive of nonheteronormative families.

In "Abandon This Palace of Language: On the Rhetoric of the Body in *A Yellow Silence*," poets Katie Marya and David Winter offer a blended-voice dialogue in which they reflect on a collaborative, sonic, intertextual, outdoor art installation created with architects Hilary Wiese and Holly R. Craig and based primarily on the poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik. *A Yellow Silence* originally showed on Centennial Mall in Lincoln, Nebraska, as a part of the Lincoln PoPs: Global Frequencies public art exposition in the fall of 2019. Informed by feminist theory, this richly layered essay opens, in the words of one *WCC* peer reviewer, "a discursive place to consider the role of listening and social healing through sculptural space and sound," reminiscent of the practice of "deep listening," a term coined by the late avant-garde musician Pauline Oliveros. The piece theorizes contextually specific connections among silence, listening, and the body and enacts that theoretical work on the page. It is a beautiful demonstration of the collaborative, multimodal, interdisciplinary, embodied, identity-based disruption of normativity we are committed to centering in this journal.

Invoking feminist theory through radical solidarity and practice, Vani Kannan offers "Archiving the Third World Women's Alliance: A Conversation with Sharon Davenport." Kannan's research project focuses on the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA)—a multiracial women's organization that grew out of the Civil Rights/Black Power movements and maintained active chapters in NYC and the Bay Area during the 1970s. In particular, this essay traces the labor of archiving the papers of the TWWA next to Kannan's own embodied experiences as a cross-disciplinary teacher/scholar of rhetoric and composition and women's and gender studies. Her identity as an organizer who prioritizes behind-the-scenes, feminized labor—and who braids together the work of internal document preparation and childcare—orients her to the labor that scaffolds more public-facing work like building theory and speaking publicly. Drawing on an interview with Sharon Davenport, who processed the TWWA's archives, this article situates archiving as indispensable, feminized, and often-invisible labor that builds the context for feminist writing, theorizing, and teaching in institutions of higher education.

Closing out our second issue is Pauline Baird's genre-bending book review of Vivette Milson-Whyte, Raymond Oenbring, and Brianne Jaquette's (eds.) *Creole Composition: Academic Writing in the Anglophone Caribbean*. In traditional Caribbean villages, the bell crier made important announcements from street to street. People listened and carried the news further. Like the proverbial bell crier, Milson-Whyte, Oenbring, and Jaquette, along with 14 contributors, announce "We are here. And we doin' dis—'write [ing] our way in'' to academic spaces (2019, p. x). Baird highlights how the authors provide current perspectives on postsecondary composition pedagogy, academic literacies, and research across multiple academic disciplines, while drawing from her own experiences with Caribbean culture and teaching globally. Baird's review exemplifies the ways our personal connections to scholarly work need not be left out of academic genres, such as book reviews.

Baird's piece represents one of the first of what we think of as a *reconsidered* book review—a hybrid genre that opens a space for the writer's experiences; unlike most book reviews, Baird the reviewer is very much present. One anonymous journal reviewer (yes, we send out book reviews just like any other scholarly submission) acknowledged this fresh approach to book reviews in their note: "Although the review is classified as 'review,' I think it creates a new genre, as the essay continually expands on its subject, deftly combining material from the book under review with the reviewer's lived experiences and references to scholarly work." We plan to include reviews of this nature in future issues of the journal.

As we launch into a new year, much is changing in our global, national, and local contexts; of course much is the same, and so very much remains uncertain. In the midst of it all, we hope readers find connection in these pages, solace and inspiration. We invite you to read, listen, *feel*, share, ponder and then . . . we invite you to write. If there is one thing we've noticed in our journey as editors over the past year, it is that writing matters, writers matter. Writing is how so many of us make sense of our worlds and our places in it, how we find each other, bolster each other, how we doggedly pursue meaningful change in the midst of chaos and how we feel a little less alone in our efforts. So keep reading, keep writing, and send us what you write. We are eager to cultivate *Writers Craft & Context* as a generative space for writers to engage with whatever comes next.

## CALL FOR INVOLVEMENT

Our inaugural issue attracted a wide audience and prompted readers to reach out via email and social media to share their experience with *WCC*, which they reported was so unlike their engagement with typical journals. Readers described getting lost in the pages, devouring every article, essay, and word. They described the journal as "a breath of fresh air," expressing gratitude for a new publishing, knowledge-making space that "create[s] and nurture[s] hope." Two pieces, "We Read Your Letter" and "Still Christmas," were nominated for *Best of Rhetoric and Composition Journals* as representative of the alternative kinds of writing academic writers (and readers) engage with and value.

We try to communicate the spirit captured in the inaugural issue when we visit with writers and reviewers about the journal; we reiterate our desire for writing that engages the human, that grapples with multiple subjectivities, that opens space for writers and readers to bring their entire selves to the diverse acts of collaborative meaning making writing invites. We regularly witness embodied reactions to our vision. We see eyes widen and tear up, smiles spread and lips tremble, hands cover hearts, heads bow. Academics and intellectuals crave the connection that happens when we stop hiding behind "objectivity," "data analysis," the structure of a research article in STEM or social sciences. We hope all writers feel welcome to tell, and honored to receive, the stories behind the performances and products within traditional academic contexts and publication venues.

For many, writing in this way can feel unfamiliar and scary. To support the process, we invest in mentoring all kinds of writers in all parts of the process. Our reviewers read rigorously and generously with a commitment to work with writers to accomplish their own goals for their manuscripts, whether that means publishing with *Writers: Craft & Context* or finding a more fitting home for the work. So, if you feel hesitant to submit your writing, if you can't shake the feeling that it's "not ready," send it anyway. We are eager to be in community with you as you develop your ideas and drafts. And if you, like us, are sustained and invigorated when you are in conversation with courageous writers taking risks and pushing limits, send us a note so we can add you to our growing community of reviewers.

**Thank you - Reviewers V2**
Nancy Alvarez
Sonia C. Arellano
José Manuel Cortez
Lauren E. Cagle
Whitney Douglas
Genevieve García de Müeller
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# Good Girl

**Amy E. Robillard**

Amy E. Robillard is professor of English at Illinois State University, where she teaches courses in rhetorical theory, composition studies, and life writing. She is the author, most recently, of *We Find Ourselves in Other People's Stories*, and the co-editor, with Shane Combs, of *How Stories Teach Us: Composition, Life Writing, and Blended Scholarship*. She lives in Bloomington, IL, with her husband, Steve, and their three dogs.

**Abstract**
In this personal essay, an act of aggression by my nine-year-old dog triggers me to contemplate the relationship among touch, communication, and violence during a pandemic. More specifically, after I let her run (illegally) off-leash at a park near my home, my dog, Essay, attacked another dog for what seemed like no reason. I was horrified, and, having grown up in an abusive home, had to come to terms with being on the other side of an attacker/victim dynamic while I waited to hear whether the other dog would be okay. This prompts me to consider what it means to control our dogs, whether words can touch us when we cannot touch one another, and what it means to be a good person during a pandemic.

**Keywords**
violence, touch, dogs, abuse, pandemic

My first thought was inappropriate. My second thought, inappropriate. But they both rushed into my head so quickly they actually couldn't be classified as thoughts so much as involuntary reflexes.

"I see you out here with these dogs off leash every morning and you *don't* have control of them," she cried at me.

She was slowly gathering herself off the sidewalk, brushing her thighs. She stood, took her head in her hands, unsteady on her feet. Then the tears came.

"You—you're out here *every* morning." She looked down at her dog, also now unsteady on her feet. She rubbed her hands over her dog's body, walked her a little and cried out.

"She's *hurt*. I'm gonna need to get your information."

I stood there, eyes wide, horrified. Essay was now on her leash. I had just pulled her off the woman's dog, and the first thought that came to my mind when she accused me of having no control over Essay was that I was *not* out here every morning. The second thought was that I never let both dogs off leash. Only Essay.

In the face of trauma, I was setting the record straight, if only in my head.

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There's a story I tell myself, one I try to maintain by walking the dogs regularly and posting frequent photos of them on social media, one I persuade myself is true by talking about their clever names and loving them desperately. That story is that I am a good dog owner. But I am not a good dog owner. I am impatient. Too impatient to ever train them properly. They are trained enough to sit for a treat, but neither dog knows any other commands. They don't know "stay" or "come" or even "down." They don't even really respond to all the *no*s I offer up in a day. They pretty much do what they want and I love them for it.

*Marshall, Essay, and Hattie.*

Essay attacked the other dog in early April, during the coronavirus pandemic. My husband Steve and I had been working from home for three weeks. He works for an insurance company, and I teach for a university. My classes had been moved online, and I was now communicating with students exclusively in writing. Our leaving the house had been reduced to going to the grocery store once every ten days or so and walking the dogs twice a day.

I had been just about to clip Essay's leash to her collar when she got away from me. I'd let her run off-leash in the neighborhood park, the one we walk to all the time. This is the park where we so often see Baxter, the huge black lab who is never anything but happy. He and Essay had run together while Marshall, our other dog, tried to play catch-up. I never let Marshall run off-leash; instead, I kept his leash attached to him and let him trot off behind Essay and Baxter. Marshall's legs are so short—he's part beagle—that I'm pretty confident I can catch him if he runs off. But I don't trust him enough to take the leash off him. He's only two. I trust Essay; she always comes when called. It may take me calling her a few times, but eventually she comes to me.

After our visit, Baxter and his mom, Janet, had gone their own way, and I was just about to hook Essay's leash to her collar to walk her home when Essay caught sight of the woman and her dog, whose name, I now know, is Casey. But Essay darted away from me, toward Casey. I could feel my hand run along her back as she did and for a split second, I thought about grabbing her by her tail to stop her.

You know how they always say, when describing any kind of trauma, that "it happened so fast"? And you wonder, really, did it happen so fast that you can't remember or you can't describe it, or are you just not able? But I'm here to tell you these things really do just happen so very fast. One second my hand is sliding down Essay's back, and the next, she is rolling on the ground with Casey, a fourteen-year-old dog, and her mom, a woman in her fifties. Casey's mom had fallen while trying to separate the dogs. There was screaming. I probably screamed. I always think about Jo Ann Beard, who writes about herself in one of her essays that her screaming button gets stuck on. They were probably thirty or forty feet from me, but I am no good at estimating distances. It didn't take me long to get to them, and I immediately grabbed Essay by the collar and pulled her off both of them while the image of the three of them on the ground seared itself into my memory.

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We're living through a pandemic. Nothing is the way it used to be. Nothing is like what I'm coming to call The Time Before. We in Illinois, like so many others across the country, are on a stay-at-home order until at least the end of the month. This means we are not supposed to be going anywhere nonessential. We can go to the grocery store and to the pharmacy and to get gas, though my first thought on that last bit was, get gas to go where? We are all supposed to be practicing social distancing, which means we're supposed to stay at least six feet from one another, but what it really means is not hanging out with friends. No gatherings, no parties, no lunch dates. The only people we can touch are those we live with.

I have never been a hugger. It occurred to me that if I had lived through this pandemic as a child, if I had had to be on lockdown with my family when I was a kid, I would have had no touch other than abuse for months.

When we get married, we promise to love our spouse in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, until death do us part. What are the vows we make when we adopt a dog? Is it something like, in old age and in youth? Anybody can love a puppy; the harder part is loving a dog the way she needs to be loved when she feels anxious, when she is afraid of the thunder, when she can no longer see. The harder part is loving a dog when you don't understand what is wrong, why she is behaving the way she is, and she can't tell you either of these things because she can't tell you anything. She cannot speak.

Because we are living through a pandemic and nobody is allowed to touch anybody else—no hugging, no kissing hello, no shaking hands, no patting one another on the shoulder—one of the things that occurred to me when Essay jumped on Casey was how much *touch* was involved. This is something I never would have thought about in The Time Before and I don't think I would have gone over to the woman to put my hand on her shoulder in The Time Before, or would I have? In any case, I didn't go over to the woman, I didn't put less than six feet between us. I couldn't. I was in shock. I don't remember clicking Essay's leash to her collar, but obviously I did that. I don't remember where Marshall was in any of this, but he was obviously there. My little Peanut. He's just a little guy, only thirty-five pounds to Essay's sixty-seven, and when we brought him home, we also had Wrigley, who weighed in at around seventy.

So, next to his two big sisters, he was just a little peanut. And the nickname stuck. He's our Marshall Peanut.

I named Essay. We adopted her just two weeks after we lost my soul-mate dog, Annabelle, and I was so grief stricken I needed a name to mark that grief. "To essay is to attempt, to test, to make a run at something without knowing whether you will succeed," writes Phillip Lopate (xlii). I'd been teaching a course on the personal essay for a number of years at that point; it was my favorite course to teach, my favorite genre to both read and write, and I had recently read David Wroblewski's novel *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* in which a dog named Essay makes an appearance. Until reading that book, I had never considered Essay a name, but once I saw someone else use it, I was sold.

She earned the nickname George not long after she came to us because she was so stinking curious. She had her nose in everything, so Curious George she became. Essay morphed to Essay-George, which sometimes just turns into George or Georgie. Lots of people think she's a boy because of this.

We are supposed to have control over our dogs, to be able to dictate their actions with a word or a command. We who want to count ourselves among the good dog owners are supposed to have spent hours and hours training them when they were young to come to us when called, to stay when we tell them to, to roll over for other people's pleasure. But Steve and I have never really done that. I think we just don't have the patience. This doesn't mean Essay and Marshall are bad dogs or that we don't have control over them. It might mean, to some people, that we are not good dog owners.

We are good dog companions. We give our dogs a warm and safe home, quality food, generous treats, plenty of toys. But more importantly, we give them so much love and attention. We walk them twice a day. We take them to dog parks. We play tug and fetch with them. We take them for rides, each dog on one side of the car, head sticking out the window. They sleep in bed with us, snuggled right up against our bodies. They cuddle up against us at night as we read or watch TV. They are a part of our family, and we talk to them and care for them better than we care for ourselves.

What is really at the heart of the fantasy of controlling our dogs? Are dogs not creatures with their own volition? When I was a kid growing up in a home in which I had incredibly little control over anything in my life, all I wanted was control. I couldn't wait until I grew up so I could eat Burger King for every meal if I wanted to. Abused by my older sister, I had no control over my own body. Even while I slept, I was the victim of harsh slurs, as my sister would walk through my room on her way to the bathroom and call me a "fat fuck" or a "shithead" or tell me I was "dead as soon as Ma left the house." To control what I could, I got good grades and became an avid reader. My librarian set aside new books for me, and I devoured them with Mindy the cat by my side. I couldn't control her either. When she was done sleeping by me, she'd up and leave and I'd be by myself. I controlled the things I had control over, which was basically my schoolwork. I was diligent and obedient and a quick study. I earned all As. I received affirmation at school and none at home. This did not help me emotionally. I was still a wreck inside, scared of my own family, unsafe at home. Always yearning to get out. Desperate to be alone.

Now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Steve and I are home all the time and home is safe. Essay and Marshall are not accustomed to our being home so much, and Essay enforces her routines even more than normal. She's always been a creature of routine, making it very clear to us when 3:30 rolls around each day that it's time for her walk. We used to joke about it, and a year ago when she had to be kept overnight at the hospital after surgery on her knee, we laughed out loud when we realized she wasn't there telling us what to do. We didn't know what time to get up, what time to eat breakfast, what time to take a walk.

Now, as we try to figure out what made Essay go after the other dog in the park after I'd let her run off-leash, we come back to our being home all the time. Steve and I are both working from home, but I have much more flexibility than he does. He is at his computer most of the day, so I walk the dogs during the week. This means Essay is with me all day, every day. She was already attached to me, clingy even, and having me home with her all the time doesn't give her a chance to miss me. So perhaps, we figured, as we talked through the incident at the park, she was feeling more protective of me than usual and she understood Casey as a threat in some way.

When the woman, whose name, it turns out, is Barb, got up off the ground and brushed herself off, she noticed Casey's limp, started to cry, put her head in her hands, and told me she was going to need to get my information.

"Of course," I said. "Of course. I can text it to you if you give me your number."

She didn't have her phone with her. "Can I trust you to do that?"

"Yes. You can."

And then, "She's fourteen years old and she's *hurt*."

She then asked me to walk over to her yard with her. Turns out her house backed up to the park, so when she said she saw us out here every morning, she meant it. I walked slowly, lagging behind, texting her as I went. My whole body was shaking. I tried to keep my thoughts from racing, but my dog had just attacked a fourteen-year-old dog and what if she bit her and what if the dog died and is she going to sue us and Essay has never done anything like this before and what is *wrong* with Essay and oh my god, the dog is *fourteen years old*.

When we got to her yard and Barb retrieved her cell phone, I apologized again and said, "I know these words are hollow, but Essay really has never done anything like this before. I would be angry, too, if I were you."

Hollow words. Empty words. I am a person who studies the effects of language, and in that moment all I could do was offer words anybody else in my position would offer. Words that meant nothing. Words that did nothing. Words I knew were hollow. So I said them again to try to solidify them.

"I know these words are hollow, but I truly am sorry. She won't be running here again. She's really never done anything like this before."

Can words touch us? During a time when we cannot touch each other, can words touch us in places where we hurt? Can we reach out with just the right words and have an impact when our hands or arms cannot? I want to believe they can.

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"She's never done anything like this before," I told Barb about Essay. And now I think, we've never been through anything like this before, all of us required to stay home, to work from home if we can, to distance ourselves from each other. To refrain from touch. Touch is a primary form of communication. Violence is a kind of touch. Violence, of course, is a form of communication. It sends messages of pain and frustration and hatred. It sends the message "I am hurting."

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As soon as I was done giving her my information, I turned around and began walking home. Once I was out of the park, I called Steve and began sobbing. I asked him to pick us up. I knew I could walk, but I didn't want to. I didn't want anybody to see me sobbing along the way. At home, sitting on the stairs so we could both pet Essay, I was still shaking, sobbing as I tried to tell Steve everything that had happened. And then I spent three hours staring at my phone waiting for an update from Barb, imagining worst-case scenarios.

"What if the dog has a heart attack from the suddenness of the attack? What if she dies? What if her leg is broken and they decide they don't want to put her through the pain of the recovery process and they put her down and it's all George's fault?"

"None of that is gonna happen," Steve assured me.

"The dog is *fourteen*."

"I know. She's gonna be okay."

"But is Essay okay? Why did she do this?"

"I don't know. She's gonna be okay."

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We don't tell very many stories that enact empathy for the attacker and here I was, the owner of the attacker, desperately trying to find a way to live with the fact that my dog had attacked another dog for what seemed like no reason. I didn't know if I could have empathy for myself. I was the one who broke the rules and let her run off-leash. I *needed* to have empathy for Essay. I needed to know what was wrong with her.

I have lived my entire life with the mindset of the victim, and I have even made it part of my professional work to call out the abusers. I write about sibling abuse, calling on others to recognize it for what it is: the most common form of domestic violence and *not* just sibling rivalry. I write about misogyny in places you might not expect to find it, like the academy, where we're all allegedly progressive. I know so many people have stories of being victimized because so many people have shared their stories with me. What I didn't know was that people would also share their stories of their dogs behaving badly in order to make me feel better. I needed those stories so badly.

What I didn't know was that it hurts so badly to be on the other side of this dynamic.

I got onto the computer and researched aggression in older dogs—Essay is nine—and came up with all kinds of possibilities. She could be more aggressive because she has a painful tooth or because she's losing her vision or because she has some kind of internal pain or because she's developing dementia. We already had a vet appointment set up for a couple weeks out, but I wanted to talk to our vet before that. I needed to know that there was nothing wrong with our girl.

After lunch, I finally received a text from Barb telling me her vet—same veterinary hospital we go to—told her not to come in unless it was an emergency and to keep an eye on Casey. And she thanked me for checking on Casey. Deep sigh of relief. Casey wasn't going to die.

I've trusted in words for so long. They're my life's work. They're my lifeline. They show up in my dreams, formed into sentences and paragraphs. I try to capture them when I wake.

Once I even had a dream in which the everyday things I did were formatted into MLA format. As in: Robillard, Amy E. Walked to parking garage. Normal, IL. October 10, 2019.

In 2020, though, I sit in front of this same screen for so many hours a day, feeding it words and consuming the words it gives me. The words it gives me sometimes are harsh. I read the news and it tells me that we are all at risk of contracting this deadly virus at the same time that the president downplays it at the same time

that tens of thousands of people are dying of it and that the early narrative we heard about young people being relatively safe from it is simply not true. I read the news and it tells me that Breonna Taylor has been killed while sleeping in her own home and none of the officers responsible for her murder have been arrested and I keep seeing the words over and over again and I add to them, too: Arrest the officers who murdered Breonna Taylor. I read the news and it tells me Ahmaud Arbery was lynched while out jogging and I want to turn off the computer. But I know I cannot.

To stave off the endless flow of words that come from this screen, I toggle over to Word and I feed different words into it, hoping to ward off the fear and loathing and anger the pandemic has brought out in me. I'm always asking students to think about what words *do* and now that I think about the give and take of the words on this same screen—the *same screen*—I wonder, too, about what words do. Do they stave off panic? Do they make me feel less alone? Do I write because I seek fellowship? Do I hope that by writing about Essay's attack I will somehow be absolved of it? That words will perform a kind of affective alchemy?

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Later that afternoon, I was walking Essay and Marshall at a nearby trail when I received another text from Barb telling me she was going to take Casey to the vet after all. Casey was still in pain and couldn't walk and she seemed to be getting worse. I told her to have them call me so we could pay the bill.

About an hour later, our vet's receptionist, Jen, called to get payment information and told me Casey was going to be okay. When she expressed her disbelief that Essay had done this, I nearly wept with gratitude. I needed someone neutral to be in disbelief about Essay, too. And then she told me a long and involved story about the time she was dogsitting a friend's dog and her own dog attacked the visiting dog for what seemed like no reason.

"Sometimes this just happens," she told me. "It's not just Essay."

And I told her I was worried something was wrong with Essay, so we moved up our appointment a week. Before we hung up, she assured me that these things sometimes happen for no reason and that, most likely, there was nothing wrong with Essay. It didn't mean she's a bad dog.

When she said those words, I nearly doubled over. I didn't know how badly I needed to hear them. I didn't know until that moment how much my own identity was wrapped up with Essay's behavior that morning, how my understanding of myself as a good dog owner was contingent upon Essay doing all the right things, on her being a good girl at all times. And Jen reminded me, too, that Essay is probably a little off because Steve and I are home all the time. And I felt so much better. I needed those words so badly.

Can words touch people? Yes. Yes, they absolutely can.

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The next day my friend Katherine reminded me of the time her own dog bit the electrician and she was worried for days he was going to sue her. I had forgotten all about it. The only other friend I told about the attack told me how much she loved Essay and that Essay would always be her girl.

What does it mean to be a good person during a pandemic? We're told it means staying home and maintaining social distancing and wearing masks when out in public. We're told it means not going to the store for unnecessary items no matter how badly we need that bag of soil for our garden.

There is a kind of violence enacted in leaving the house for frivolous reasons because we take our own and others' lives into our hands. It's hard to wrap our heads around this because the coronavirus is invisible, it is carried by asymptomatic people, and we could all be guilty of inflicting harm.

We communicate now with our bodies, with what we do with our bodies. Where we put them. What we put on them. Whether we take them out in public. The protesters who want the states to reopen prematurely enact a violence with their bodies as they put them out there in public and then bring them back home to their families. As they then interact with all of us.

Essay communicated with her body when she attacked Casey. It's the only way she knows.

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At Essay's vet appointment a week later, Dr. Burks examined Essay and found nothing wrong. She told me she was hearing so many stories of animals behaving badly because their people were home all the time. Cats urinating everywhere but the litter box, dogs doing things they would never otherwise do.

"Essay is not alone," she said.

Those words again. I needed those words.

We've all heard the saying "hurt people hurt people." We know that, on some level, people who abuse others do so to some degree because they are in pain. I used to take comfort in this knowledge, my logic being that if they're going to inflict pain on others then they deserve the pain they're in. I see it a little differently now. I would never ask Barb or her husband to try to understand what I went through after Essay attacked Casey; I would never ask a victim to empathize with an attacker. Never. But I needed desperately that day to be understood, to feel like I wasn't alone, and I needed Essay to continue to be loved. Without feeling those things, I'm not sure how I could have carried on.

What facilitated those feelings was other people's words. Words carried to me through the telephone from friends who understood on some level that I needed to hear them. They weren't words I read on the page or on the screen, but putting them here on this screen will, I hope, facilitate similar feelings in others. This is how this works. We share words, we tell stories, we assess a situation and we decide which words fit best. We gauge how a person is feeling, how that person wants to feel, what we can do to facilitate those feelings, and we choose our words carefully. And we share them. We sometimes reach for words that have been used over and over again to the point that they're worn out from overuse and we pad them to show we really mean them. Life is a series of incidents we walk through for the first time, following others who have experienced similar incidents for the first time and who came up with words to describe them. And we add to those words. We write.

***

On our morning walks, we still go to the park, but Essay never runs off-leash. We've run into Casey and her dad walking a few times, and always we turn around and take a different route. I probably look like a coward. But what I want most is for him not to have to see us. I want us to not exist for him. I see sweet little Casey—she's probably 45 pounds, in between Marshall's and Essay's sizes—trotting along and my eyes begin to water because she is a good girl and she did nothing to deserve what Essay did. I want to pet her and tell her I'm sorry. I want her to be happy. She looks happy.

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**Acknowlegment**

*The author would like to thank Sarah Hochstetler for her fabulous early feedback on this piece and for her friendship. And thanks, too, to Steve Field, for living this with me.*

# My Year of Writing through Diasporic Melancholy

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**Abstract**

In this personal narrative, I reflect on my changing relationship to writing as I used it to navigate the trauma, grief, and outrage I experienced as a diasporic Hongkonger in the US in 2019 and early 2020. At the time, Hong Kong was embroiled in a massive pro-democracy movement against the government. I explore how my experience with writing shifts as I move from writing primarily for academic purposes to writing for a more public transnational audience. I also reflect on the complexity of navigating geopolitical tension while attempting to cultivate transnational cross-movement solidarity based on shared struggles against state violence.

**Keywords**

personal narrative, trauma, diaspora, hong kong, transnational, state violence

Since June 2019, I have been watching from afar as Hong Kong protesters and activists have taken to the streets repeatedly—first to demand the withdrawal of an extradition law that would allow the Hong Kong Chief Executive to extradite anyone Beijing demanded to mainland China, and later, as protests intensified and police violence became more rampant, amnesty for all arrested protesters and an independent investigation into the police force. In August, I sat on the floor of the fixer-upper I had just purchased with my partner in Lexington, Kentucky, my eyes glued to the livestream on my phone: antiriot police were brutalizing protesters in the Tai Koo subway station, the neighborhood where I grew up. I saw, mediated through a screen, police beating unarmed protesters with their batons as the protestors fled down an escalator. I would later find out that the police had also fired pepper balls and tear gas in close range of the protesters inside the subway station. As I began to create a new home in the United States, the home where I grew up was crumbling.

The dissonance I felt then as a diasporic Hongkonger would only intensify over the next few months into 2020. Because of the 12-hour time difference between Hong Kong and Lexington, I woke up to live footage of protests and police brutality on my phone. I played these livestreams in the background as I got ready for the day, the coffee maker making noise alongside protesters singing the anthem “Glory to Hong Kong.” On the computer screen in my university office, I watched student protesters in Hong Kong wrestled to the ground, beaten up, and arrested by police, just when I was about to go teach and face my own students. Diasporic melancholy was, I realized, the ambiguous loss and heartbreak we face when the transnational politics that inform our every fiber are, for our peers, merely news headlines to be scrolled through.

Throughout the next few months, police violence and governmental suppression of dissent heightened. As of November, 2019, 88% of Hong Kong’s population was affected by tear gas. A year after the movement, close to 10,000 have been arrested, many of them youths. Watching the movement unfold, I struggled with an immense

sense of guilt for not being on the streets, for not putting my body at risk alongside fellow Hongkongers who were risking a ten-year sentence each time they went protesting. As an intersectional feminist and a researcher who studies social change and grassroots tactics, I understood that I was contributing to the movement by teaching and writing about Hong Kong and about the political structures that had led to the current turmoil. And yet, as I saw the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong engulfed in flame and protesters tackled and arrested en masse at the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong, it was hard to convince myself that writing a journal article about Hong Kong could in any way ameliorate the trauma, anger, and fear Hong Kong protesters and myself are experiencing.

I tried anyway. Having published numerous journal articles in rhetoric, I was comfortable and familiar with the genre. I began to consider how I could tap into my academic expertise to bring more attention to the movement in Hong Kong, specifically to amplify the experiences and tactics grassroots protesters were deploying. I feverishly finished a manuscript that used a reproductive justice framework to analyze the Hong Kong police's usage of tear gas. In it, I highlighted how activists from different backgrounds organized to combat this social and public-health crisis. For instance, medical professionals created an underground network that offered pro bono service to people who were injured; civilians with scientific training engaged in citizen science, collecting and analyzing samples from tear-gas cannisters since the police refused to release details of the gas's chemical content. I completed and submitted the manuscript in a week because of the sense of urgency I felt. I realized that the leisure to carefully ponder and pour over a manuscript for weeks, sometimes months, on end was a privilege not afforded to writers whose home was under siege, and hence my manuscript urgently demanded public attention. I had thought that by submitting the manuscript as swiftly as I could, I would be able to catch up with the speed with which collective trauma was accumulating. If I could catch up with the struggles Hong Kong protesters were facing, I thought at the time, I would feel less guilty. I was eager to do anything to alleviate the sense of powerlessness I felt bearing witness from afar. Writing had never felt more pressing to me. Trained to marinate my ideas and produce articles slowly for a largely academic audience, I was unaccustomed to writing under such exigence and heartbreak.

As the political turmoil in Hong Kong, and later the world, intensified, my relationship to and perception of writing and genres began to shift. The pandemic had first hit Hong Kong in February because of its proximity to mainland China, where the coronavirus outbreak originated. Hongkongers had, from the very beginning, adopted a universal mask policy. There was, however, a mask shortage that disproportionally affected poor people, disabled folks, and the elderly who could not wait in long lines to buy masks or could not afford the inflated prices. While people in the United States still saw COVID as a foreign disease that afflicted only those far away, I was spending most of my mornings and evenings talking to my anguished parents and grassroots organizations in Hong Kong that were collecting masks to donate to marginalized communities. As I combed through the Internet and local pharmacies in Lexington for surgical masks to ship to Hong Kong, I became enraged not only at the Hong Kong government's suppression of protest but also at their relative inaction to protect communities that were most impacted by COVID. Instead of turning to academic writing like I used to, on a whim I wrote an op-ed for the *Hong Kong Free Press*, an independent prodemocracy news platform founded as a response to the Umbrella Movement in 2014. Articulating how people who were most affected by the mask shortage were the ones who were already marginalized because of poverty, disability, and race, I illustrated in my op-ed why Hong Kong's mask shortage was a social justice issue. A few days later, my piece was published, and the editor of the press invited me to be a regular contributor.

As my op-ed circulated on the press's website and across social media platforms, it garnered support and positive reactions almost immediately from readers. Having spent weeks hunting for masks, many Hong Kong audiences found that my critique resonated with them. This was my first foray into public writing, and I did not expect the instant gratification and validation to feel as good as it did. Outside of conference presentations and private writing groups, in academia we rarely receive feedback so quickly from our readers and with so many deep, urgent emotions. Since then, I have been writing op-eds twice a month, using my training as a transnational rhetorician to weigh in on various sociopolitical issues in Hong Kong.

Writing as a diasporic scholar who has straddled traumatizing news and oppression across geopolitical contexts, I struggle with ideologies and ethical commitments that intersect and diverge in complex ways. In late 2019, as protesters felt more desperate because they feared that their demands would not be met by the Hong Kong government, some began appealing to the United States explicitly—specifically, the Trump administration and GOP politicians like Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Josh Hawley who had expressed support for the Hong Kong movement as a way to challenge Beijing. Most protesters in Hong Kong understood that Trump was most concerned with his own interests but chose to appeal to him anyway, since he was a strongman figure with a "tough on China" platform. A faction of protesters who harbored right-wing nativist values, however, genuinely supported Trump and had held up banners and signs that represented Trump as the hero.[1] As a diasporic Hongkonger in the United States, I supported the movement's antiauthoritarian agenda, but I also vehemently opposed the Trump administration and the ideologies it stood for. In May,

1 Mainstream Hongkongers' support for Trump intensified during the 2020 US presidential election, which came after the implementation of the draconian National Security Law that criminalizes all protests and forecloses institutional outlets for dissent.

as Trump continued to jeopardize the health and safety of the American public by mishandling the pandemic, I penned an op-ed urging Hongkongers to reconsider their thin alliance with Trump.

A few hours after it was published online, the Facebook comment section of the essay and my Twitter mentions were filled with venomous criticisms and ad hominem attacks. While I could stomach attacks from American Trump supporters, the comments from local Hong Kong people hurt the most. Based on the logic that one's enemy's enemy is one's friend, both groups had equated my criticism of Trump with unequivocal support for the Chinese Communist Party. Other Hongkongers criticized me for writing from the ivory tower as a diasporic person in the United States without a keen understanding of the despair and desperation on the ground.

While I understood that the Hongkongers who attacked me did not represent all activists in the movement and that there were left-wing protesters who shared my thoughts, I began to feel like an imposter, a traitor almost. Because the movement was decentralized with protesters from different camps enacting various tactics, the movement had developed an ethos of solidarity, one that demanded protesters and activists never criticize one another publicly. Scholars and critics have pointed out that this feature had concretized organizing tactics in a way that made the movement ideologically unadaptable. Having this knowledge, however, did not make those comments about me any less hurtful. Keenly aware of distance and position of privilege, I critically pondered whether I could stand behind my argument, and even if so, whether it was right for me to have written it so publicly.

Because I am a professor whose primary writing experience has been in the confines of academia, my writing rarely has the immediate emotional and political impact my op-ed writing has had on myself and my readers, including Hongkongers who are struggling against an increasingly authoritarian and repressive regime. As I continued to write publicly, I realized that donning the analytical hat of a rhetorician helped me more critically understand the negative feedback I received from readers on social media. That understanding, in turn, ameliorated the emotional pain. Rhetorical knowledge also provided me a way to more thoughtfully navigate difference in positionality and ideologies within my own community of Hongkongers. In my scholarship, I have considered the relationship between critical empathy and anthropologist Arlie Hochschild's theory of the "deep story": that our arguments are based primarily on the stories of realities we tell ourselves. Bearing in mind these rhetorical concepts and applications, instead of internalizing the critiques I received from local Hongkongers, I asked, "What motivated them to feel this way, and to believe in this ideology? Why would they choose to mobilize this particular example as evidence?" I was, to put it differently, practicing what Krista Ratcliffe calls "rhetorical listening" as I listened to and for the cultural logics that motivated Hongkongers' support for Trump.

The rhetorical ecology surrounding Hong Kong became more complicated as the geopolitical tension between Washington and Beijing escalated, with the two governments lambasting each other's human-rights violations while denying the state violence they inflicted on their own citizenry. Meanwhile, fanned by the Trump administration during the pandemic, anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States was also on the rise. Trump and the GOP's anti-China platform had motivated many of his supporters in the United States to support the Hong Kong movement as a means to attack the Chinese government. I was, hence, acutely aware that my writing about Hong Kong could be appropriated and redeployed by white supremacists.

Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, Beijing had bypassed Hong Kong's supposedly autonomous legislative structure to impose a set of national security laws, laws that would broadly incriminate anyone locally and abroad who engages in activities that challenge the regime. After this law was implemented on July 1, 2020, Hongkongers began to scrub their social media profiles and self-censor in fear that they would be prosecuted and potentially face a life sentence. On the one hand, because of the chilling effect the national security laws have on local Hongkongers, I now have an obligation to fill the void and speak up against Beijing's suppression. On the other hand, however, as many Americans conflate the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with Chinese people writ large, my critiques of the CCP might be circulated in ways that intensify Sinophobia in the United States, resulting in violence inflicted on Asian Americans and immigrants like me. Indeed, since the relationship between the two states worsened, I noticed an uptick of Twitter followers on my account who were far-right Trump supporters in the United States. The binary logic reared its head once again: if we share the same "enemy," then I must be a friend of theirs. On the flip side, when I tweeted and wrote against racism towards Chinese people, I garnered support from pro-CCP Chinese nationalists who would later hurl insults at me for my critiques of Beijing's repressive policies in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Transnational rhetoricians have reminded us that as discourse travels in interconnected networks of power across state boundaries, they are often repurposed and redeployed in ways that eclipse the rhetor's intent and the texts' originating context. My experience as a diasporic writer gave me an embodied understanding of what it means to do and analyze transnational rhetoric.

My academic expertise in transnational rhetoric became even more relevant to my public writing when I began advocating online for grassroots transnational solidarity between Hong Kong activists and the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States. Despite historical and contextual differences between the two movements, both groups of activists demand a radical overhaul of the current police system while uncovering how the state has been inflicting physical and emotional violence on those who dare challenge the existing systems of power. Further, the BLM protests provided a key moment for mainstream Hongkongers to confront and address the rampant racism and anti-Blackness in the city that often went

unchecked. I penned an op-ed for a Hong Kong audience that highlighted the coalition potential between the two movements and conversed with local Hongkongers on social media platforms who were skeptical or outraged by this argument. While, like BLM protesters, Hong Kong activists have been brutalized by the police and have called for the abolishment of the police force, many local Hongkongers have chosen to denounce or remain silent about the BLM protests. Desperate to garner support from political actors they deemed powerful enough to oppose the Chinese government, local Hongkongers feared that their support for the BLM protests would offend Trump and Republican lawmakers who had been the most vocal supporters in Washington of the Hong Kong prodemocracy movement as part of their anti-China platform.

I was not alone in attempting to foster transnational grassroots solidarity between Hong Kong activists and the BLM movement in the United States. Hong Kong activists on the political left, including many diasporic Hongkongers, have argued repeatedly on digital spaces and in various publications that rather than appealing to the Trump administration and right-wing politicians for help, Hong Kong activists ought to engage in coalition building with other grassroots movements in ways that acknowledge rather than subsume difference.

These activists and thinkers, especially those who contribute to the Lausan Collective, a decolonial organizing and publication platform created mostly by diasporic Hongkongers, have modeled why we ought to cultivate transnational grassroots solidarity through writing and other forms of activism. For example, while Beijing used the United States' national security policies to justify its own national security laws in Hong Kong, the Duterte regime in the Philippines cited examples from Australia and announced a similarly draconian antiterrorism law. Meanwhile, Beijing was also responsible for sending thousands of rifles to the Philippines to help with its "counterterrorism" mission. In addition, as activists in the United States called for abolishment of the police, Trump's executive order on Hong Kong revealed that the Department of State has been responsible for training the Hong Kong police, now infamous for their brutality and lack of accountability. By publishing and translating articles written collaboratively with activists in Lebanon, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand, and by hosting panel discussions that bring together local Hong Kong organizers and Black activists from the United States, Lausan organizers demonstrate how, in spite of geographical distance and contextual differences, our struggles are intimately linked transnationally.

As diasporic subjects who live at the intersection of sometimes competing cultural contexts and transnational geopolitics, we do not fit neatly into dominant lines of belonging. This positionality allows us to embody what Aimee Carillo Rowe calls "differential belonging" in *Power Lines*: *On the Subject of Feminist Alliances*: namely, it is a politics of relations that allows "cultural workers to move among and across these various positionalities and loyalties . . . without feeling trapped or bound by any one in particular" (33, 41). On Twitter, diasporic Hongkongers in the United States highlighted the strong sense of déjà vu and reignited trauma we felt when we saw video footage from Portland. In addition to similarities in protest tactics shared by activists on social media, the methods the police and government used to suppress the protesters were also similar. In both the United States and Hong Kong, protesters were beaten and dragged into unmarked vehicles by state agents who disguised their identity and badge number. In both cases, authoritarian state leaders had called for harsh militant suppression of protesters while denouncing them as "rioters."

For those of us who have participated in and borne witness to grassroots uprising across state boundaries, the collective trauma and coalition potential of this moment are often felt on a transnational scale, motivating us to articulate a praxis of transnational grassroots solidarity that decenters the state. In *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, Martha Nussbaum opines that emotions play a key role in whether and how we promote social justice causes that do not directly impact us. Nussbaum posits, "If distant people and abstract principles are to get a grip on our emotions . . . these emotions must somehow position them within our circle of concern, creating a sense of 'our' life in which these people . . . matter as parts of our 'us'" (11). As a diasporic Hongkonger, I intimately felt the fear, rage, and grief that came with participating in a movement that has resulted in immense physical and emotional trauma, a movement that has been hampered by the implementation of a draconian national security law. While I will never occupy the same positionality as BLM activists in the United States, the women protesters in Belarus, or the student activists in Thailand, I recognize our shared struggles against an authoritarian state structure that renders lives unlivable for many, and I also understand, in an embodied way, what it is like to live and struggle under a constant state of rage, numbness, grief, and terror.

Carillo Rowe writes that with "coalitional subjectivity," the subject "sees her oppression and privilege as inextricably bound to others and when she cannot envision her existence and politics as separate from others' existence and politics" (10). Diasporic Hongkongers in the United States—including myself—understood that the same right-wing politicians who supported the HK movement were also the ones who advocated for military suppression of Black and brown protesters in the United States. As people of color and immigrants in the United States, we had experienced firsthand the trauma and violence inflicted by the Trump administration in ways that are reminiscent of the authoritarian regime Hongkongers are struggling against. Our concerned critiques of this realpolitik alliance with the American right are sometimes met with vitriolic pushback from local Hongkongers who believe that we are speaking solely from a position of privilege as diasporic subjects who are not in immediate danger of state violence and suppression, much like the pushback I received after writing my op-ed on Trump months ago.

As I continued to engage in dialogues with Hongkongers from different positionalities and wrote alongside them, I realized that I was enacting deliberative empathy, a rhetorical concept I developed in my academic monograph *Inconvenient Strangers: Transnational Subjects and the Politics of Citizenship.* Deliberative empathy is an emotional response and practice that promotes coalitional thinking. It combines constitutive deliberative acts with the critical cognitive model of empathy, urging interlocutors to identify overlapping interests with others through shared material context. Rather than denouncing local Hongkongers who prioritize what they consider realpolitik over transnational grassroots solidarity, I understood that their perspective stemmed from a deep sense of dread and desperation because of how dire the situation is on the ground in Hong Kong. Under the National Security Law, the Hong Kong police has arrested and prosecuted activists, former lawmakers, and protesters for "seditious crimes" such as carrying a "Liberate Hong Kong" banner. Seen through this lens, they were not entirely wrong in calling out the relative safety and privilege we enjoy as diasporic activists who are implicated by Hong Kong's sweeping National Security Law, but do not face immediate arrests for challenging the Hong Kong government's draconian policies.

On the other hand, diasporic Hongkongers who work alongside Black and brown activists in the US understand intimately that state and police violence is a transnational phenomenon that is not limited to Hong Kong, and they have resisted the tendency to exceptionalize the conditions in Hong Kong. To this day, I continue to sit with and live by the question: How can we mobilize deliberative empathy in conjunction with diasporic sensibilities to cultivate transnational solidarity and coalition across grassroots movements while holding ourselves accountable to the interests of our different co-strugglers across contexts? How can we effectively articulate and critique interconnected systems of power that led to the violence marginalized people face transnationally, while accounting for specific political contexts and affective attachments?

Inspired by the writing and organizing work of Lausan and other Hong Kong-based transnational advocacy like the Borderless Movement, I started gathering data to write an academic article in rhetorical studies that examines the fraught rhetorical work involved in cultivating transnational coalitions. By analyzing how activists in the United States and Hong Kong navigate complex geopolitical tensions and cultural differences, I planned on using this as a case study to illustrate coalitional rhetoric in situ. I conducted research for this article while engaging in activism on social media. In the process, I discovered that a group of self-proclaimed far-left authoritarian regime apologists in the West (commonly called "tankies" or "alt-imperialists" on social media) had been spreading conspiracy theories and disinformation about the Hong Kong protest, claiming that the movement was orchestrated by the CIA and that the protesters were funded by the U.S. government. Since the BLM protests began, this group—led by writers and founders of the conspiracy news platform *Grayzone*—had been dissuading liberals in the United States who support BLM to denounce the Hong Kong movement. Citing state-sponsored media from Beijing and the faction of Hongkongers who appeal to Trump and the GOP, they posited that the Hong Kong movement was a far-right movement, contrary to the BLM uprising. As activists from both movements and diasporic Hong Kong public intellectuals have repeatedly pointed out, the two movements in fact share similar struggles against police violence and unchecked state power in criminalizing dissent. As a transnational rhetorician and diasporic Hongkonger, I understand acutely how the protest tactics and beliefs of local Hongkongers could be interpreted differently and misconstrued once entered into the U.S. rhetorical context.

As I researched the arguments and rhetorical artifacts of tankies, I stumbled across a website that espoused the pro-China, alt-imperialist ideology. I had been enjoying putting my rhetorician hat on to analyze the sometimes intersecting and sometimes contradicting arguments among different stakeholders, but my heart stopped when I saw my name and my writing on that website. Using mis- and disinformation, the unnamed author of the site had mercilessly mocked me and critiqued the op-ed I wrote on transnational solidarity. The journal manuscript I was working on suddenly took on unexpected emotional weight.

Later that week, as I continued to dialogue with other diasporic Hongkongers about this tension on Twitter while gathering primary artifacts for research, I was accidentally pulled into a controversy: youth-led advocacy groups in the Sunrise Movement had decided to cancel a webinar with leftist Hong Kong organizer Johnson Yeung after they were attacked vehemently by China apologists and pro-Beijing conspiracy theorists. In one window, I had a Word document opened for my manuscript draft, and in the other, I was explaining to a social media organizer from the Sunrise Movement why Hong Kong activists were incensed and saddened by their cancellation. A few hours later, I received an email inquiry from a journalist, inviting me to weigh in on this controversy for a news article. The article was published a few days later, and I was quoted extensively in it. As I cited this news article in my manuscript, I inadvertently turned my own words and experience into primary data. I became, simultaneously, the subject and object of my research.

This uncanniness is perhaps what defines the messiness and possibilities of writing from a transnational diasporic orientation. Since the wave of global uprising during the pandemic, I have come to realize that the transnational sensibility that emerges from witnessing shared political struggles and experiencing collective trauma orients us differently than do rigid lines of identification defined by nation-state boundaries or cultural and ethnic sameness. As a diasporic subject in the United States, especially one who comes from a former British colony and now a neocolony under Beijing, I have never fully belonged to a national community defined by fixed identities and allegiances defined by the state. In other words, the only way to write and to make sense of the world is by constantly

interrogating how my subjectivity is connected through complex geopolitical networks not only to local Hongkongers but also to others who share similar material conditions and struggles. To write transnationally, then, is to hold in tension competing worldviews, messy lines of allegiances, and at this very moment, the collective trauma and shared rage, despair, and hope in creating a more humane political future.

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# For the Love of Writing: Writing as a Form of (Self-) Love

**Gabrielle Isabel Kelenyi**

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**Abstract**
In this autoethnography, I share my lived experience as a writer and look for how I have come to enact (self-) love through my writing by taking an asset-based lens to analyze family-inspired literacy practices. In so doing, I aim to share ways in which writing instruction in school contexts can help students develop individualized writing processes that help them love writing even when it's hard. As such, this piece illustrates my personal experiences with writing and writing instruction and explores how to apply them to writing pedagogy. I assert that, as writers and writing educators, we must rethink the function of writing and reclaim what kind of writing is productive: writing for/as love is functional and relational; it is a radical act.

**Keywords**
love; self-love; writing; teaching; autoethnography

I became a high school composition teacher after graduating from college because I sincerely wanted to share my love of writing with others, to show students the incredible power they could wield with the confidence and ability to write. As an eager first-year teacher excited to work with students who looked like me in my hometown, this was a driving force in my lessons: sharing the magic that can come from connecting with others through writing—both as writers and as readers. However, a large component of my job as a teacher at a new charter school was preparing students for college entrance exams, like the ACT. Swept up in the audit culture of my charter school and the frenzy around test-score growth and college preparation, I too easily fell into a focus on preparing my predominantly low-income Black and Brown students to gain entrance into and survive college so that then they could survive the "real" world, which I regularly told my students would require clear communication in the form of professional emails and standard academic English. As a young teacher whose job depended on growth in standardized test scores and passing random classroom audits, I didn't question what and why I was surviving. I simply entered survival mode, and I desperately wanted to help my students survive with me. And both by example and in my lessons, I showed my students writing is for survival, it is for academic and professional contexts, it is a product that will incur cold judgement, and it has little to no personal value—writing is functional and not relational. There is no warmth, no connection, no love in writing.

I deeply regret many of the lessons I imparted to my students about code switching, standard academic English, professional communication, and college writing. When I decided to leave the classroom and enter graduate school, it was because I was utterly exhausted, disenchanted, and angry at the way I seemed to be required to share writing with my students, embittered at how I was sharing writing with my students. I knew there had to be a better way, and if graduate school couldn't help me find it, it would help me figure out ways to come up with that better way myself. Bound up in what Bettina Love calls the "educational survival complex," or the fact that because

"schools mimic the world they [students] live in," they become "a training site for a life of exhaustion" where students learn "to merely survive" (27), I had forgotten what I wanted to accomplish as a teacher in the first place—to help students love writing.

In order to find my way back to my original motivation to teach, and specifically to teach writing, in this autoethnography, I look for how I have come to enact (self-)love through my writing. bell hooks writes about the practice of love as a move toward liberation: "Love was the force that empowered folks to resist domination and create new ways of living and being in the world" ("The Practice of Love" 195). This can be true of writing as and for love. While hooks writes about love as a way to turn away from the domination of white supremacy, I assert love can also transform the practice of writing from one that is viewed as harmful, tedious, and painful by many students into one that is transformative, worthy, positive, and healing. This is because writing is a way to understand and be understood, to feel and be felt, to commune, to connect . . . And love, according to hooks, is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, and trust ("The Practice of Love" 195). Thus, writing can enact love when it is used/taught/framed as a means of connection between writers and readers to demonstrate and/or build any (hopefully all) of those five factors.

In order to keep writing, in order to meet the challenge to find ways to speak to others' experiences through my own—to make the individual more universal—I've needed to flip the stereotypical script about the act of writing from one that is punishing and painful to one that is safe, empowering, and loving. I share this flipped script with readers now with the hope that others can reconceptualize writing as well, both for themselves and in the writing classroom. As writers and writing educators, we must rethink the function of writing and reclaim what kind of writing is productive: writing for/as *love* is functional and relational; it is a radical act.

## WRITING AS LOVE

My earliest memories of writing are steeped in love. I remember my mom and dad sitting at the kitchen table for hours working on my mom's papers for her master's classes. There were yellow legal pads and books strewn all over the table: notes and outlines and drafts that marked my mom's process, her path toward understanding the prompt and crafting her answer. My mom and my dad sat next to one another for hours, talking and arguing, noting and drafting, until they had a truly *rough* (as in words scratched out and arrows and carets galore) handwritten (by my dad) draft. My dad wasn't in the master's program; it was my mom who was getting her master's degree in public health administration. Yet, he worked with her on every one of her papers and consoled and encouraged her when she felt like giving up. As my mom figured out her ideas, my dad wrote and organized, asked questions and wrote some more, and patiently helped her bring her ideas into focus.[i] All those papers my mom wrote throughout her program were written with a lot of sweat and tears, but they were also born out of the love she and my dad share. At a very young age, and without knowing it, I witnessed writing as an act of love.

When I think about it further, writing as an act of love surrounded me as a small child. I remember love notes seemingly everywhere: notes in our lunchboxes, notes on the fridge, notes on the coffee machines that read "Have a tremendous day!" or "Good luck on your presentation!" or "I miss you already." Many times they included practical reminders, too, such as "Don't wake up your dad—he works tonight," or "Remember to take out the garbage," or "I'll be home by six today," or even "Don't fight over the remote!"—but they all ended with love:

XXXOOO, Love,  ,
Dad Mom G

Writing was love put into action in my family—it made material reminders that you're important and what you're doing right in that moment (eating your lunch, opening the fridge, making your coffee) is important. In a very real way, writing is an integral part of how my family demonstrates our love for each other.[ii] As both an action and a product, writing is a collaborative act(ivity) that connected my mom and my dad in the moment of cowriting papers for my mom's master's classes, *and* writing is an artifact that connected my mom, my dad, and us kids in moments apart through love notes. Both enabled us to feel closer, to feel seen, to know we are loved.

My forays into writing beyond family love notes and essays for school began because I saw my older brother Jasson writing on his own. Jasson filled red spiral notebook after red spiral notebook with his writings, from raps and poetry to journal entries and records of ideas. In rare moments, Jasson let me into his room and shared something he'd written with me. I looked up to my brother immensely as a kid, and I still do. And so, when I first began writing poetry on my own, it was to be like my big brother, to impress him, to have something in common with him, to perhaps instigate another fortuitous invitation into his room. Jasson made writing outside school cool.

And so, I wrote inside school and outside school. Rarely did my personal writing and academic writing cross over. In fact, there were quite a few moments my parents made the distinction clear. Peeking through my open bedroom door to find me furiously scribbling away in my notebook, my dad would ask, "What are you writing?" Undeterred and breathless, I'd reply, "A poem." Ever the responsible parent, my dad would reply, "Have you done your homework?" And when the answer was no, I was reminded school should come first. "School is your job," I vividly remember my parents telling me many times when they feared I was getting too distracted. *School is your job*. Well, if school was my job and academic writing my work, if you will, writing poems was my pleasure, my balance. I loved both: writing poems and academic essays

was something I felt *good* at; my teachers, friends, and family all encouraged me to keep writing. No one was ever specific about *what* I should keep writing, except for reminders that schoolwork should be the priority.

So, it was clear from early on that writing would become my profession. However, because academic writing and creative writing had remained in such separate realms for most of my life, I felt I needed to choose between the two. That is, I knew I wanted to be a writer, but what kind would I be? I distinctly remember many moments I chose between poetry or academic essays, moments I unquestioningly accepted the notion that writing for pleasure and writing for work could not coexist in my life on equal footings. School was the priority, and as I progressed further in it, school made little to no room for poetry. As I chose writing for school more and more often, I slowly forgot I had ever successfully struck a balance between the two, that writing for pleasure and writing for work (for school) had coexisted, had informed one another and supported one another and made me feel whole and balanced. I realize now that as I chose writing for school over writing for myself time and time again, I was being socialized to survive rather than to thrive (Love). I didn't question the either/or view of writing my parents and my teachers and even my opportunities seemed to encourage. You can be an educator *or* a poet; you can be an academic writer *or* a creative writer. It seemed you just couldn't be both, at least not equally. And as my parents liked to remind me, school was my job, so this responsibility guided the choices I made. If I wanted to write, I'd need to prioritize writing for school.

It's interesting that this binary between writing for myself and writing for school, writing for love and writing for work that I let crystallize over time, has followed me through life. Poetry has remained a side gig, a hobby. Academic writing—both teaching it and producing it—is how I make my living. I was incredibly lucky to have models of writing as interpersonal love during my most formative years, but I let the physical and metaphorical divisions between writing for school/work and writing creatively and personally on my own overshadow that foundation.

Feeling the need to choose between what I wrote and for whom over and over again, being reminded that I had a job to do, a duty to fulfill in school-based writing, that should take precedence over the writing I wanted to do for myself, made it so I didn't allow my love for writing in general to connect my academic and personal writing. They remained separate entities in my mind: writing for school was my work and writing poems and personal notes was just for me; one was to secure my future by creating more (academic) opportunities, and the other was just a hobby, not a way to securely earn a living one day. (Writing for) *School was my job*, after all. Jobs are how you make money and survive. And poetry was not my job.

Such a clear distinction, reinforced by my parents out of a neoliberal middle-class sense of love and protection, obscured how both writing for school and writing creatively on my own both let me enact love—love for school, my teachers, my classes and love for friends, crushes, and family members. That is, not only did I love my written products (sometimes) no matter whether they were for school or for personal inclination, but I came to love the act of writing, too. In writing I found a sense of approval and accomplishment I in turn wanted to share with others. As a reader, I marveled at the way writers shaped my understanding of myself, others, and the world around me; as a writer, I strived to achieve similar effects—for my readers to feel understood, to put something they've struggled to articulate right there on the page and let them know someone else also feels that way.[iii] *That's* why I love writing. I love working to achieve *that* outcome, that connection built between writers and readers that demonstrates *care* for a topic and an audience, that demonstrates a sense of *commitment* to craft, that augments and exchanges *knowledge*, that takes *responsibility*, and that builds *trust*. Just like the connections forged between my family members through love notes, essay help, and intriguing red spiral notebooks.

So, in order to elevate those connections and honor the foundation of writing as interpersonal love that my family modeled, I reject the either/or view of writing my parents and my teachers, my opportunities, and my experience teaching seemed to encourage. As my dad helped my mom with her essays for her master's classes, they demonstrated how important school is; however, what was more salient to me at seven or eight years old was that my dad helped my mom because he loves her, and my mom accepts my dad's help because she loves and trusts him. And what was the product of their love? A draft. An (academic) essay. A piece of writing. And with this in mind, now I choose a both/and perspective on how and what I write in order to find out what happens when love drives writing (no matter what arena), when we look for love in our writing processes and products. In exploring my relationship with work, love, and writing, I realize writing is my work because I love writing *and* I love writing because I believe writing (and teaching writing) is important work.

## WHAT & HOW I WRITE

It's about 5:00 p.m., and I'm about to leave my shared graduate student office in the English Department and catch a bus home. As I wrap my scarf around my neck and walk toward the elevator, I pull out my phone from my coat pocket and begin drafting a quick text message to my partner to let him know I'm on my way and approximately when I will be home. I'm smiling at my phone, partially because I'm finally on my way home after a long day and partially because the message of my text is sweet and easygoing: the words flow without pause from my mind through my thumbs and into the message.

"OMW home to you! ETA 5:40pm. Can't wait for pasta bake with you! 😘"

I don't think twice about any of the words I've used. I don't consciously consider my tone or my diction; my audience and purpose are crystal clear. I'm letting my loved one know that I'm on my way home, that I'm hungry and ready to enjoy dinner with him. Text messages and emails like this to my partner, close friends, and family are many times about practical matters (like leaving work) but always outlined with love: I know these audiences well, and they know (and already love) me.

Now consider a different seemingly simple text message scenario: it's approximately 8:00 a.m. on a Wednesday, and my brows are furrowed as I type and delete, type some more and delete again a text message to a high school student as their academic coach. I want to catch them as they begin school for the day and check in about how their week is going, their progress toward the goals we set for the week last Sunday, and their overall well-being. I begin:

> "Hi, Jackie![1] How are you?"

Nope. I have just one chance at soliciting an answer, so this question isn't direct enough.

> "Good morning, Jackie! Have you turned in that missing assignment for History?"

Nope. This is much too direct, and I don't only care about that missing assignment.

> "Hey Jackie. What's up? How's school?"

Nope. Now this is too general, and I'd rather avoid getting a too general response.

> "Hi Jackie. I hope you're making good progress on that history assignment. Let me know if you need any support with getting it turned in before our next meeting on Sunday. How's preparing for your math test coming along? Remember to take it one topic at a time. You got this!"

I settle. My student might consider it an essay text, but it does everything I want: walk the line between business-oriented and personal, includes specifics from her goals for the week, lets her know I'm here to support her, and expresses confidence in her ability to achieve her goals. All in just six sentences!

As an academic coach at SuccessHelp,[2] I work with high school students to augment their executive-functioning skills, like time management, initiative, and organization, for school. Text messages and emails like this to my SuccessHelp students, as well as to other more specialized audiences like supervisors or other members of professional organizations, don't flow as easily as emails or texts to my partner, friends, and family. These messages must walk a line between friendly or helpful and professional or direct; these audiences might know me but in a more serious, distant manner (and they likely do not already love me) because that's what helps me do my jobs—from helping high school students stay organized and develop healthy study habits to negotiating my schedule and delegating, completing, and following up on tasks. Striking the right tone and conveying the clearest message that will achieve the desired effect is important to me in these instances because the stakes seem higher than when I'm composing a message to audiences who already care (about me and/or the topic). How to make my high school students care enough to answer my text message, or entice my supervisors and colleagues to care enough about scheduling and to-dos?

In just these two examples of composing text messages, it's clear how I write seems to change depending on whether I'm writing for professional audiences and/or purposes or personal audiences and/or purposes. Here, what and how I write seems to separate neatly into writing that flows easily from my mind through my fingertips out onto the page and writing that takes more consideration, planning, and revision. However, this binary that seems so natural and apparent doesn't hold up when I ask myself *why* I write what and how I write.

While it may seem like audiences and topics inform why I write (for example, my professors assign essays they will read or my students need guidance to succeed in a class), when I go deeper, it's clear love actually undergirds all I write. Looked at through hooks's five factors of love—care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, and trust—what and how I write are imbued with care, sometimes for myself, sometimes for my audience, and still other times for my topic, but most times for all three. No matter the rhetorical situation, I find myself in that rhetorical situation because love brought me there. That is, I feel responsible for what I write (genre), need to persuade whomever I'm writing to (audience) to trust me and my information, hope to impart and build knowledge around what I'm writing about (topic), and care about why I'm writing (purpose) because the progress of my students, my career advancement, and (most importantly) my connections with others through writing are all implicated.

Coming to this realization that love undergirds all my writing doesn't make writing easier. In fact, it can be a little daunting. I know and believe in the power of words presented in just the right way to achieve a desired effect, and that's why I love writing—because of the possibility to impact someone or something inside and outside yourself that writing always presents. But knowing and deeply believing in writing's power is a *heavy* weight. So when the words don't just flow (which is often), it can be incredibly anxiety producing. It can be hard to get started. It can be hard to keep writing.

1 Jackie is a pseudonym.

2 SuccessHelp is a pseudonym for a local organization for which I work that provides academic coaching, test prep, and tutoring services.

However, I have had to learn how to curb that anxiety so as to remain productive, especially considering the demands of graduate school and all my other responsibilities—all of which require writing.[iv] I do this by incorporating how I've seen and experienced writing employed as an act of love into my general writing process. In this way, I embrace the idea that everything I write is an act of love: love for the audiences I write to, the classes I write for, the people I write with, the genres I write in, the topics I write about. My writing process protects me from anxiety and helps me stay productive—it loves me. It is kind to me because it enacts the idea that what I must write is important and impactful, that somehow some way it will enact and spread more love through demonstrating care, commitment, responsibility, and trust, and through sharing knowledge.

I have shaped the writing strategies and tools I've picked up from teachers, writers, mentors, family, and colleagues along the way into ones that work for me. In that way, I've found ways to make my writing process less anxious and more motivating. One way I do this is by intentionally drafting *over time*. Building time into my process helps me reduce anxiety over writing, making my process deeply personal and good for me. By allowing my process to be more intuitive and less rigid, I have developed a process I love and that loves me each time I sit down to write because I know I have time to get closer and closer to achieving all I want my writing to achieve: lovingly considering my audience's needs and possible responses, committedly and responsibly meeting the requirements of the writing task at hand, and treating my topic with love and respect. My process includes time to discuss what I'm reading and writing with colleagues, professors, and even my partner and my brother, which further enhances my ideas and productivity.

I know coming to a written product I'm pleased with takes time; I know my process intimately, so I trust my writing process to get me there. And so my writing process is an exercise in unconditional love: by embedding time into my writing, my process reduces the anxiety various writing tasks might incite and makes writing more intuitive and habitual. Because reducing anxiety is an act of self-love, my writing process enacts self-love; it protects me from possible damage induced by writing.[v] As a result, my process makes writing easier because it makes progress on writing part of the routine: even just a paragraph completed is progress, polishing what I already wrote is progress, adding new information to my outline is progress. The steady progress and patience inherent in my process allows me to trust my process, to feel loved and supported by it, to know deeply that it will bring my writing to where I want it to be.

However, I can't always control the conditions for my process, such as when deadlines loom before I fully understand a topic or policies require responses and/or reports within a timeframe that doesn't allow for enough reflection. So what happens when my process requires more time than I have? These are moments when I doubt my process and when I doubt my writerly self-efficacy because I must deviate from my writing routine. Thus, in writing this autoethnography, I've had to grapple with the question, How do I persevere in those moments that make me question my ability to write? I'm sure you've already guessed the answer: love. Not only am I incredibly fortunate that I mostly get to write what I love and get paid for it, but my love for my audiences, my topics, my students, my field helps me push forward. I write for them, to express care for them. If I want my writing to spread the love, I need to write. And so even in those moments of crisis and (time) crunch, I do. Mostly, though, I'm grateful the manageability built into my writing process allows me to do what I love even when I feel unprepared, overwhelmed, or lethargic. As such, my writing process is an act of self-love, especially when I must write what I am not ready or inspired to write.

Using love as a lens for my writing lets me see how all the writing I do is because I love writing. I chose to be an educator and to enter the field of writing studies because I love writing and I want to share that love with others, help others come to love writing, too. So when I write papers for classes about topics I misunderstand or when I write emails to my secondary and undergraduate students, and when I find these writing tasks to be tedious or difficult, I persevere out of love: love for my students, love for my field, love for my work. In fact, I think I find some of these tasks hard or tedious because I love what writing can achieve and my purposes for writing them so much. Loving others and loving yourself is hard sometimes because it requires extra care, but that's what makes me feel good at writing, feel confident my writing can achieve its purpose—the fact that I feel capable of putting in that extra care, forethought, and anticipation. The care I take in my writing enacts love for my audiences and myself, for my topics and my purposes.

## FOR THE LOVE OF WRITING

My phone vibrates once in the front pocket of my sweatshirt. I'm in the grocery store, but I recognize the single vibration as signaling a work email. I slip my phone out of my pocket to take a quick peek at the notification. My shoulders slump at the sight of Thela's[3] name, and I'm worried at the contents of the email. I provide feedback on manuscripts, application materials, essays, and proposals for my students as well as for strangers on a freelance basis, and over the summer I agreed to help Thela with her preliminary exams and dissertation proposal. She reached out to me for help organizing her ideas, saying she has trouble getting the information from her brain onto the page in a smooth way. Thela was looking for long-term help, to build a relationship with someone around her writing and her important research topic. I typically have more time to dedicate to such work during the summer, so I agreed. Plus, the extra spending money I earn from this freelance work doesn't hurt.

3 Thela is a pseudonym.

But now it's the fall, and the semester has begun, and I'm worried about my ability to balance her writing needs with my own writing responsibilities. Additionally, that line between friendly or helpful and professional or direct thickens again in these situations, which makes such freelance tasks more tedious.

Where's the love here? I'm in the bread aisle at the grocery store with my shoulders slumped and worry furrowing my brow as I look down at this notification, bracing myself for a challenging writing week ahead. Why do I agree to this work if Thela's email doesn't give me joy? I click on the notification, and Thela's message appears on the screen. It reads,

> Dear Gabbi,
>
> I'm writing to share wonderful news with you. We did it! I just received the notification that I passed my preliminary examinations, and I am now a dissertator! Thank you for all your help. It feels so good. Graduation in 2021 is possible. Thank you so much.
>
> Be well,
>
> Thela

A smile spreads across my face, and my chest swells with pride. I am *immensely* happy for Thela, and I'm so grateful to have been a part of her journey and contribute in my own small way to her success. Here's the love. Here's where writing—helping Thela organize and transcribe her thoughts onto the page just as my dad did for my mom all those years ago—is an act of love. I provide feedback to my undergraduate and secondary students as well as freelance employers because I want to help them come to love not only what they've written but also the act of writing. If my assistance helps make their writing process smoother, easier, or more purposeful, then I've accomplished what I set out to do: share my writing love with or instigate similar writing love in others. In this case, Thela has experienced a tremendous writing accomplishment, and she can associate a feeling of pride and excitement with her process. Her sentence "Graduation in 2021 is possible" indicates a growing sense of confidence in her ability to write her dissertation, to earn her PhD. Such transformations in writers with whom I work lets me know we've made progress in shifting views of writing as a barrier to writing as a bridge. This shift is where I see the most potential for writing instruction.

Writing—both the act and the product—is important because it helps both writer and reader feel seen and understood. In her classes on theories of literacy, my advisor Kate Vieira draws stick figures to represent the reader and the writer and between them a heart with the word "text" written in it; she goes on to explain that the text is where writer and reader—with their various backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences—meet and where they "decipher," "interpret," and "***feel***" ("What's New about Writing" 26).[vi] What if writing were taught with the creation of positive feelings of love, trust, and security at the center? What if love became the lens through which students and teachers examine and augment their writing practice? How might dominant notions of the act of writing as hard, painful, and generally inaccessible or unsurmountable change? How might notions of giving and receiving writing feedback change?

I didn't come to my writing process all by myself. It is the product of years of practice both inside and outside school and the conscious and unconscious accumulation of practices and strategies into my writing repertoire. It has evolved from what I was taught in school into something much more personal because I was motivated by love: my love for the cathartic and connective act of writing as well as my love for the sense of care and protection my written products could enact. Writing as and for love was modeled for me from a very young age by my family. What if we brought such a conception of writing—writing as a loving act—into our literacy curricula? By looking at the teaching of writing through the lens of hooks's five factors of love—care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, and trust—writing instructors can help students see writing in a new/different light.

For example, presenting writing as an act of care for one's audience or topic might help transform a writing task from tedious into worthy of time and effort, as with connecting with my SuccessHelp students. Understanding writing as a commitment to oneself and one's community, as a way to connect with and understand oneself and others, might help make writing less harmful and more healing, as with my own writing process when I'm tackling topics I find difficult. Looking at writing as a way to build knowledge both personally and with others that can instigate social change could make writing as an act and a product more transformative than rote, as with helping Thela. Treating writing as a responsibility to cultivate and maintain trust between writer and reader might help transform writing from a school-only activity into a meaningful practice that decodes the world and our way in it, as I found early on in poetry.

Such a practice—that is, teaching writing as a practice of love—is important to challenge the "educational survival complex," where students learn "to merely survive" (Love 27) and where I found myself frustrated as a young teacher. The educational survival complex is the result of neoliberal educational reforms that profit off "dark families' dreams of thriving through education" and maintain (and in many cases augment) systems of oppression (Love 33). When I chose academic writing over writing poetry, writing for school over writing for personal fulfillment, because writing for school would breed more opportunities, I hoped to thrive; however, one cannot thrive without balance, without fulfillment, without love. Teaching writing as a practice of love means teaching writing as a way to thrive and heal as opposed to a subject to be survived; it means practicing and fighting for justice in all its forms[vii] in and outside the literacy classroom; it means affirming students' literacy

practices matter whether they come from academic or nonacademic contexts; teaching writing as a practice of love means embracing critical theories as ways to move forward (hooks, "The Practice of Love"; Love).

What a blow to neoliberal reforms in education teaching writing for/as love could be—because such a practice challenges the functionality of writing that seeps into the rationale we build for students in our literacy classrooms, transforming it from simply a means of survival in a world that requires ever-increasing levels of literacy (Brandt, *The Rise of Writing*) to a means of connecting and relating with others, to a means of learning, to a means of reclaiming what kind of writing is productive.

In order to challenge the way neoliberal education reforms and purely economic views of the rise of writing in our society are co-opting the function of writing, as writing instructors, we must transform the predominant view of writing in literacy classrooms from one that makes students groan or cry to one that inspires students to connect and "learn from, through, and while writing" (Yagelski 24). This can happen when teachers intentionally shift the focus of writing instruction from the writer's writing (product) to the writer writing (process), as advocated for by English-education scholar Robert Yagelski. When students come to know their unique writing process well and gather a wide variety of tools and strategies to help their process evolve in the face of novel writing tasks, they can leverage writing to love themselves and love others in various circumstances. The value of teaching students writing processes in composition classrooms is helping students regard their writing process as one that enacts intra- and interpersonal love, as a means of enacting positive social change through connection with others.

For example, imagine how K–12 students might react if developing a writing process was presented to them from the very beginning as a way to practice self-love and not as a series of rote steps. Would they be intrigued? Would their curiosity and creativity be piqued? Imagine if writing strategies and practices were presented as options to choose from and try out, to use when necessary and appropriate, instead of rigid requirements. Would students feel inclined to take risks with their writing? Would they feel more confident in their ability to not only complete a writing task but also overcome obstacles along the way?

Writing processes that help students love writing (even when it's hard) can be (re)created in literacy classes by purposeful teachers who use humanizing pedagogies to help students draw from their own "cultural frameworks, lived experiences, and diverse learning styles . . . to transform power/knowledge relations" (Camangian 428). According to Patrick Roz Camangian, such pedagogies "[confront] oppression, [affirm] the humanity of the learner, and [use] literacy as a *tool* to transform their realities and subvert subjugation" (428; emphasis mine). Humanizing pedagogies celebrate the power of the literacies students already practice, disrupting literacy normativity (Pritchard) and encouraging self-love. Such pedagogies can facilitate the creation of writing processes that enact love because they prioritize student choice and affirm what students bring with them into the literacy classroom. For example, learning sciences and literacy scholar Kris Gutiérrez advocates for a sociocritical literacy praxis, which "historicize[s] everyday and institutional literacy practices and texts and reframe[s] them as *powerful tools* oriented toward critical social thought" (96; emphasis mine); such a praxis challenges "traditional conceptions of academic literacy and instruction" by privileging forms of literacy from nondominant communities (96). In a way, then, sociocritical literacies make room for self-love, for loving the literacies students bring to writing classrooms, especially for students from nondominant communities. Humanizing pedagogies not only prioritize and celebrate the humanity of individual students but also help students from various backgrounds build loving, affirming ways to connect across communities by framing writing strategies and processes as literacy tools.

Both these examples highlight how literacy practices are *tools* for students to use however they wish and feel confident doing so. Student choice in the practice of writing and developing writing processes unique to individual students can help students find their writing "flow, or the condition of being so resolutely focused on an activity that one loses sense of external time and space" (Feigenbaum 33). Developing a writing process that loves the writer and instigates flow by making writing more intuitive and habitual can help writers keep writing, even when writing gets hard or motivation wanes. That is to say, if you come to love and trust the process because you recognize it as a means for learning, connecting, and transforming, then the product is not only less important (as it should be, according to Yagelski), but also you can leverage your process for those less authentically motivating but still important writing tasks. Additionally, developing writing processes unique to individual students in which students choose the writing strategies that work best for them and the task at hand demonstrates that there's no one right way to write; in this way, writing teachers can make writing instruction more equitable and humanizing and therefore more unconditionally loving.

A holistic focus on writing as a pedagogical tool to practice love can help both instructors and students disrupt literacy's perpetuation of power inequities.[viii] At the beginning of the penultimate chapter of Bettina Love's *We Want to Do More Than Survive* is a quote by bell hooks about coming to theory because she was in pain: hooks writes,

> I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for love. (qtd. in Love 124)

Bettina Love says this quote made her smile

> because hooks, like she has done as a writer and critical thinker for the past forty years, conveyed in written form, what my entire being had been trying to express for years but lacked the emotional and intellectual understandings to do so. I needed a way to pull my thoughts and feelings together to say something that explained to myself the world in which I lived. (124)

This is what writing/literacy can accomplish: helping others feel seen and loved and understood, just like the love notes left around my childhood home. This, I believe, is what we should be striving to help our students achieve—that same ability to express and connect that Love felt with what hooks wrote. This is the heart that connects writer and reader and represents the relationship between writer and reader that Vieira never fails to address in her literacy classes, that should be the focus of literacy education and the focus of developing one's writing process. Teaching writing as/for love can help students realize how to leverage their own writing for social action, for change, for peace, for connection. The question for writing instructors isn't what makes writing hard and easy for students, nor is it what kinds of writing will get them through the "real" world. The question is: How do we write and teach writing in a way that is safe, empowering, and loving? I write because I love writing, and whatever I must do to help others love it too, I'll do—we should all do.

**Notes**

i My mom is an example of Martin Nystrand's assertion that teacher evaluation can stall the writing process (96); she was incredibly hampered by anxiety over how to correctly and intelligibly answer her professors' prompts. Teaching writing as a practice of love could help relieve some of that anxiety, especially with a move away from sole attention on product and toward more attention on writing process.

ii In the powerful words of Raúl Sánchez, "Contrary to common sense, writing does not simply record or commemorate. As both an event and an object in the world, writing actively participates in the world…" (78); this is true in just the microcosm of my family—we write love, and our notes serve as a record of our love for one another. Bringing a conception of writing as both an event (process/action) and an object (product) that can enact and spread love can help challenge depictions of writing as painful and experiences of literacy learning that are indoctrinating and dominating.

iii In "Theory as Liberatory Practice," bell hooks writes, "I am grateful that I can stand here and testify that if we hold fast to our beliefs that feminist thinking must be shared with everyone whether through talking or writing and create theory with this agenda in mind we can advance a feminist movement that folks will long, yes yearn, to be a part of" (10). She goes on to say that "[i]t is not easy to name our pain, to theorize from that location" and that such work is "liberatory" (11). Writing is an act of love because it connects readers and writers within and across experiences, allowing people to heal by closing the gap between theory—that critical analysis of our lives (and as hooks specifically writes about here, our pain) in our heads—and practice—the actions we take in response to the "charges and challenges" of the experiences writers share to collectively build a revolution (11).

iv As Deborah Brandt reveals in *The Rise of Writing*, I am one of the "millions of Americans [who] now engage in creating, processing, and managing written communications as a major aspect of their work" (3). As a graduate student in writing studies, I definitely spend more than 50 percent of my "workday with [my] hands on keyboards and [my mind] on audiences" (3). What this points to is the importance of finding a sustainable writing process unique to my needs and style; teaching writing as/for love can help students come to and recognize that process for themselves.

v Many scholars, such as David Bartholomae, Carmen Kynard, Eric Darnell Pritchard, Ralph Cintron, Mina Shaughnessy, and Spencer Schaffner, have intimated or written explicitly about the violence writing can perpetrate in academic and nonacademic spaces. Thus, flipping the script by writing (and teaching writing) to practice love is important equity work.

vi Vieira writes about this lesson in her monograph *Writing for Love and Money*, but I've also been in class with her for such a lesson. The heart truly affirms the loving act that writing can/should be.

vii Love provides an exhaustive list of justices in the first chapter of *We Want to Do More Than Survive*. She writes that "educational justice can only happen through a simultaneous fight for economic justice, racial justice, housing justice, environmental justice, religious justice, queer justice, trans justice, citizenship justice, and disability justice" (12).

viii Writing (re)produces possibilities for inequity because it is not "a basic, ideology-free skill" (Wardle & Adler-Kassner 16); in fact, writing is infinitely caught up in the "messiness of political and cultural ideology" (Byrd 2). Deborah Brandt's revolutionary research demonstrates that literacy is fertile ground for the perpetuation of power inequities: literacy sponsors, or economic and political forces, affect how, what, and why people write (*Literacy in American Lives* 168). As such, these forces determine what and how literacies are valued and devalued (Miller 35), especially when those forces operate from a standard language ideology (Young 67-68), and they feed systemic inequity through the restriction of literacies of certain groups of people (Marotta) in racialized ways (Inoue; Vieira et al.).

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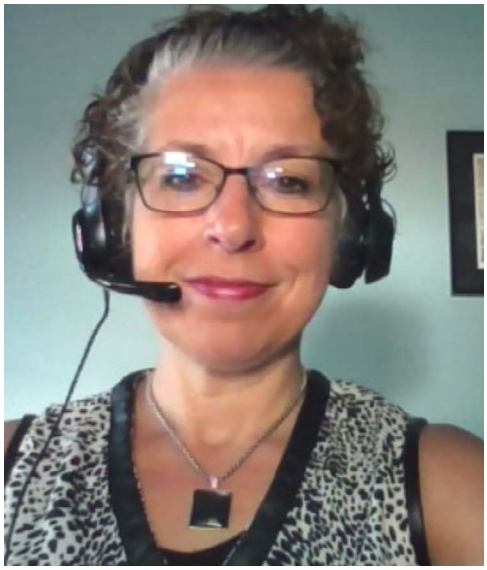
**Acknowledgements**

*I'd like to extend immense gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Kate Vieira, and my dear colleague and friend, Dr. Calley Marotta for their support in the writing and revision of this piece and their encouragement to share it with a wider audience. I would also like to thank my family for molding me into the writer I am and my partner, Casey Green, for always reading my work. Thank you to the editors of* WCC *for their support of this piece.*

# Grieving While Dissertating

**Shelly Galliah**

Dr. Shelly Galliah resides in the hamlet of Houghton, Upper Michigan, one of the snowiest and most remote places in the United States. At Michigan Technological University, she earnestly labors as an instructor and academic. Currently, she is interested in alternative forms of science communication, such as that of satire, as well as that offered by celebrities, particularly when they accommodate science and debunk manufactured scientific controversies. When not lecturing remotely in stressful ZOOMlandia, making every online mistake possible, Shelly may be found running or skiing on her local trails, accompanied by her two trusty canine compatriots: Darcie and Ruby. This essay, the first creative piece she has written in a long, long time, did not come easy, but the process was, indeed, therapeutic.



**ABSTRACT**
This personal essay, which moves between the present and the past, narrates the author's difficulty in grieving the death of not only her mother but also other family members who were lost during her pursuit of higher education. The piece critiques the workaholic culture of academia, particularly in graduate education, and comments on the availability of mental health resources for students. The author hopes that those reading the essay, especially those in academia, will recognize the importance of students' mental and physical health.

**KEYWORDS**
academia, graduate school, grief, grieving, mental health, family death

It is July 10, 2018, in a dimly lit, rundown, humid hospital room in Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada. My laptop precariously placed on an appropriated nurse's shaky supply table, I am fumbling with words. Reviewing a book on the conflict between morals and scientific knowledge is supposed to be a distraction. However, my thoughts are sporadically interrupted by the rasping of my dying 82-year-old mother, Florence, lying just a few feet away. My concentration dwindles, but my hands continue typing, churning out word salad for a subsequent ruthless editing.

Returning to the book, I find that the author's forgiving attitude towards the deeply religious leaves a bad taste in my atheist mouth. But I press on, critiquing his description of the schism between faith and science. As I struggle, the sweet, patient nurse, who has attended my mother's side for the last week, takes out her rosary and quietly suggests we pray. Together, she whispers, we may "lessen my mother's load" and prepare her for heaven. I trip over weak lies, confessing to forgetting the words, trying to silence the stalwart disbeliever in me. That small-town girl who refused to go to church in grade six, the one who realizes only death, not invocations to the Almighty, will ease Florence's pain. Seeing my mother's prone gray body precariously tubed between life and death, however, forces my capitulation. The irony of balancing the hard facts of medicine and the soft truths of faith stings while we dutifully commence: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven . . ."

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The previous day saw my unplanned arrival from upper Michigan, sweaty, rushed, and bewildered that my mother's seemingly minor accident—a tumble in scalding bathtub waters—had rapidly evolved into an urgent health crisis. Burns that would not heal, skin grafts that would not take, infections that stubbornly marched from her legs, to her urinary tract, to, finally, her heart and lungs. This is the explanation pieced

together by me from the squad of bustling nurses regularly dressing and undressing my mother's hopeless wounds. At first, I am unreasonably irate that Mom, always part squirrel in her endless scurrying and getting-things-done, could not rest long enough to let her injuries heal. Then, I grow angrier at myself for being just like her, for so chasing my academic work that spring and early summer—from dissertation to book chapter to conference—that the seriousness of her sickness was lost in the shuffle. Bursting into that hospital room, crowded with the chatter of cousins and aunts and the mingled smells of perfume, urine, and stale food, I enter as the distant, neglectful, studious daughter, the one who forgot about her mother and who rarely came "home."

"I thought I knew how sick she was, but I didn't," repeatedly sputters out while my jetlagged self rushes to my barely sentient mother, whose eyes momentarily flicker. (When the nursing staff discovered I was travelling there, they reduced her pain medication so we could exchange our final goodbyes.) In obvious discomfort, my mother finally opens her eyes, scrapes out a barely audible "S-h-e-l-l-y, my Shelly" before grabbing my hand; the next hour is spent locked in her surprisingly strong arthritic grip as she murmurs my name. For the rest of that long day, Mom's mind drifts in and out of that room before finally succumbing to unconsciousness. To that first crucial step of being gone.

There is some consolation in meeting with her while she is still responsive. The tense six-hour car ride followed by an even edgier ten-hour plane trip were both dominated by one fear: if I lost another family member without seeing them first, I would not make it, not just through my PhD, but through life. Losing my mother without saying goodbye would *finally* break me.

***

Why was I working on that damn book review? Like other academics, I have assumed a perverse pride in juggling with and fretting over multiple projects. Regardless of whether we are graduate students, instructors, tenured or untenured professors, many of us often stupidly feel that if we are not ahead, we are necessarily behind on the next abstract, paper, presentation, project—all those subsequent benchmarks demonstrating our commitment both to the job and to our research. For me, an introvert with social anxiety and random panic attacks, academia has often been an unhealthy refuge. Hopping on the academic treadmill has enabled an escape not only from my past and my people, especially my dysfunctional family, but also from friends and acquaintances—those perceived obstacles to the work that always must be done.

However, family tragedies have persistently interrupted my stolid efforts to lose myself in research, to claim my membership in the community of academic workhorses. My attempt at the master's degree was met by misfortune, or maybe just bad luck: my sister, diagnosed with lupus and mental illness, was institutionalized for several suicide attempts; and my father, a longtime alcoholic and serious diabetic, was in and out of hospitals and drunk tanks when not conjuring up illegal schemes for quick cash. Once, on a moonshine-fueled bender, he slowly drove his Ford pickup truck into a graveyard, knocking over headstones that probably tumbled like so many awkward dominoes. These dramas were managed with the stoical, yet selfish, grace honed by a kid from the projects, one who believed education was her only salvation. Barricading myself from my family meant asking for no help and just gritting my way through school, working almost full time at a grocery store while writing my masters' thesis.

Pursuing my Ph.D. and extricating myself from my clan's inconvenient dramas meant fleeing far west to the wintry wasteland of Edmonton, Alberta. This move was only a temporary getaway, however. In the middle of my first dissertation attempt, my boyfriend had a bout with cancer and my father finally won the long game of drinking himself to death. A diabetic coma captured him before I could fly home. The funeral entailed two hours of cauterizing stares from judgmental relatives. Here, in the flesh, was the younger daughter from afar, the privileged one who, in choosing study over her kin, had no time for her modest Miramichi dad.

Things slowly fell apart after that trip: dwelling on my father's funeral and my boyfriend's cancer treatments substituted for concentration. The topic of nineteenth-century naturalism seemed especially remote and petty. Not able to return to my work, I drifted away from my dissertation, avoided my advisor's emails, and eventually dropped out of the program. Armed with only an MA, I labored in the adjunct trenches for several years in Alberta, Canada, before a move to Michigan offered an opportunity to enroll in a PhD program. Again. This was my final chance: attempt two must be successful. I had only to keep my edge, keep those family tragedies at bay.

Magical thinking might make me surmise that the curse of Graduate School 2.0 killed my remaining two family members and several of my aunts and cousins, all of whom passed during this period. In the first year of the program, overwhelmed by starting again at the ripe age of 40-something, reluctant to explain my choice to my family, I rarely called home. After years of seeing me teach the 4/4 workload for little pay, they had unsettling questions about why their smart sister and daughter didn't have a *real job*, about why she had committed herself to this freshest academic hell. The tragicomedies of my mother's and sister's lives were even more depressing (and exhausting) now. Though my sister's mental health had improved, she was frequently ill from both lupus and the bad habits she would not abandon despite her slow-killing disease. My mother taxied between small towns in New Brunswick attending to my sister, pushing her octogenarian bones to exhaustion, developing the frequent dizzy spells that would eventually cause her accidental death.

Mom, trying to shield me from the trauma she knew would interrupt my work, lied about the severity of my sister's illness. Stage IV cancer abruptly took my sister during the end-of-second-term

hustle. Stuck in the United States, shocked at her death, and quietly fuming at my mother, I did not ask for extensions on my papers nor request the immigration forms that would permit me to leave the United States. I did not speak to the graduate director. The day of my sister's funeral found me avoiding tears by playing with some trifling piece of the dissertation puzzle.

***

"Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen." Coerced into prayer once again, my lips conclude this simple supplication. On the second day, the nurse gently wipes my mother's face, wets her mouth, and adjusts her pillow, being ten times the caregiver I could be. Unconscious, but breathing, my mother lies attached to an unsettling maze of tubes and cords.

Unsurprisingly, I am sticking my head down once again, plodding through the book review, trying to disregard my mother's broken breathing. The fear of messing up Dissertation 2.0, I tell myself, compels me to work, but the truth is that lingering too long in the moment will imprint my mother's suffering on me. Temporarily renouncing my atheism, I pray for her to drift away.

But rather than drift away, my mother is adamantly refusing to go gently into that good night. All of that diet watching and furniture lifting and bridge walking have made her heart stubbornly strong. The same mother who once lugged a massive television up several flights of wooden stairs because she refused to ask "a man, any MAN" for help will certainly not surrender to death *now*.

As a Catholic who thinks suicide is a dreadful sin, Mom, of course, has not filled out the paperwork for a medically assisted suicide, but she has requested a DNR (do not resuscitate) order. In her mulish attitude both not to die and not to live, here she is still, after our supposed final goodbyes, drifting in medical limbo as the dutiful staff changes her dressings, administers her medications, and checks the readings on the machines.

"She's still hanging on," one of the nurses respectfully murmurs, as if my mother can hear her. Even in life, Mom was mostly deaf, ear drums busted from encounters with my father's drunken fists. "You need to tell her she can go now, Shelly, that she can end her suffering."

"I'll try," I answer tersely, "but I am sure she can't hear me. She is not there."

The nurse mutters another prayer before informing me that they'll "keep giving her morphine . . . for the pain. The doctor says that because of her age, she should pass shortly."

Waiting for her to pass is a dreary chore. My husband is absent: en route with our dog Darcie, he is trapped in Quebec's regular summer labyrinth of construction detours. There are no more visitors, no comforting relatives. Hearing about my isolation, my old high-school friend Terry meets me on Day Two. When he respectfully attempts to hide a grimace at the sight of my still, wan mother, I interject, "It's okay. You can stare. You know she is not even there anymore, right?, just the shell of her. She doesn't even realize I am here."

"What an awful sound," he remarks at the gurgling and gagging that stand for her breathing.

Terry and his macabre sense of humor I have known too long, so I preempt his dark thoughts by confessing, "You know what that horrid sound reminds me of, right? . . . a zombie . . . almost like one from the *Walking Dead*. Only these machines are keeping her going. Her soul, as Catholics like to call it, is definitely gone."

Terry transports me to a restaurant, where I eat my first real food in days, drinking too much white wine way too early. Halfway through my meal, it ironically occurs to me this is my first social outing in months. Previously, the only people who spent time with me were my advisor, my students, and my husband. Friends I certainly made no time for. My mother's illness forced me to do what had been neglected for so long: socializing with a friend, being human.

***

Upon my return, my mother is still unrelenting. The drive that coaxed tired, old me back into graduate school was obviously inherited from her. When the absentee doctor finally makes the rounds to my mother's room, I intercept his tedious refrain about it "not being long now" to blurt out, "She is not going to go like you want, peacefully and soon. . . . Her heart is too resilient; she could hang on forever."

He drowns me with clichés about my mother being a feisty lady, "a real fighter," but the spreading infection means death is close. He then routinely yet sympathetically asks if I've had my time with her and exchanged my final goodbyes—these words being code for increasing her morphine dosage and granting her a final sleep.

The next few hours find me amidst whispering nurses administering more and more milligrams of morphine "for the pain," legally edging my mother towards the lethal tipping point. Tracking the dosages mesmerizes, yet frustrates me. Part of me is amazed at my mother's dogged refusal to die; another part is furious at her and her beliefs for forcing *me* to condone her accelerated passing. She continues hovering on the coma's precipice, her heart pumping vigorously, her pulse-ox at a ridiculously normal 98%.

Puzzled about what and whom she is holding on for, the nurses anxiously mill about. Professional courtesy prevents them from admitting so, but they are waiting to clear the room of both my

mother's body and mine. Because I have been sleeping, or should I say lying, in a cot by my mother's side, we are both squatting on valuable hospital real estate. Healthcare may be free in Canada, but beds are at a premium, so my mother and I have long outstayed our welcomes.

It takes two more long days for my mother to die. On Friday, July 13—of all days for a superstitious, yet devoted, Catholic to *expire*—her obstinate heart takes its last beats, and the machines stop their relentless humming and beeping. After Mom's death rattle continues for several minutes, I finally collapse into a corner for an ugly cry, blaming myself. When my relatives wouldn't make the decision, I was the one who agreed to all that morphine, to the removal of the breathing apparatus. I was the one who removed my mother from this earth, ignored my father's alcoholism, and missed my sister's funeral. The negligent daughter whose book learning always triumphed over family seemed responsible for all this pain, for all this loss.

My remorse intensified in the following weeks as we sorted out Mom's affairs, battling with banks, settling matters without a will, and organizing a service to appease my religious relatives. Throughout all this planning, though, I buried my misery: I ran every morning, completed afternoon errands, cleaned out my mother's apartment, had a glass of wine, went to sleep, started again. My rigorous academic schedule was replaced with an even more exhausting yet mundane one, one that avoided people and overt confrontations with pain.

***

After my return to Michigan, a few members of my dissertation committee encouraged me to take "the time I needed"; "your work can wait," they said in suitably soothing tones. But were they really sincere? What did "I need" mean, exactly? Would they have taken the time *they* required? My committee members were driven and stoical, the academics I had spent my life venerating: serious creatures bustling between meetings and *really important* projects. Surely, they must recognize there are chapters to write and deadlines to meet; there are mandatory student progress reports to complete; there are syllabi to prepare. They must realize that recovery is an indulgence, that resting would always take a back seat to my paralyzing fear of dropping out. They must know that the workaholic lifestyle they and their cohorts have modelled has made me alienate myself from others. That is, even if I had agreed to share my anguish, there was no one with whom to do so. There were no friendly departmental shoulders to lean on.

So, in true form, overwork was my solace again, which meant finally finishing that book review, sending out proposals, and chipping away at my dissertation. To all outward appearances, diligent Shelly was back on her feet, making progress again, but the pain was merely pushed down. That is, several weeks after my mother's death found me a quiet mess. Routine tasks would leave me staring blankly, stuck on the image of my gasping mother. The box of mementos carted all the way from New Brunswick remained untouched, parked in my dining room for almost five months. The phone was ignored when relatives or friends called; moments of joy and sadness were accompanied by a paralyzing fear of letting go. I could not, would not, cry again.

My grief, though, finally leaked out, just as it had previously done.

A few years before, in the middle of an important meeting on Title IX and the sexual harassment of one of our graduate students, which happened shortly after my sister's death, mourning got the best of me. In place of my opinion on the events emerged awkward tears, my stifled sadness for my sister irrationally colliding and then melding with my anger at how the department mishandled an altercation between a female LGBTQ victim and the student offender.

After my mother's death, my misery spilled at similarly inconvenient times. In class, a student's mention of his mother's cancer made me abruptly leave. In a routine meeting with my advisor, my breathing became difficult, waves of panic rising. Even my usually reliable therapy, my morning trail run, was punctuated by arbitrary swells of grief. A few jaunts found me lying down, waiting for the dizzying desolation to pass, my dog running partners hovering over me, confused by their human's temporary malfunctioning. Why are you so sad, human? So not . . . right?

But I never, ever let myself fully go then, always stamping out the tears before they roiled into an uncontrollable storm.

***

It took the death of my mother to realize that fully succumbing to grief would mean acknowledging the cloud of depression that had hovered over me throughout graduate school. It took the contemplation of her passing to make me recognize the toxic culture of academia that often makes grief untenable because sadness is a sign of weakness and mental distress yet another side effect of student life.

Depression and anxiety in graduate school are so common, in fact, that they have become normalized, if not overlooked, by students, advisors, and faculty. My first time through graduate school, practically every student I knew was on some kind of medication, but I resisted following their lead, stupidly thinking they were weak. Twenty years later, during my second Ph.D. attempt, this ignorant attitude was echoed by a high-ranking professor. "Oh, everyone is stressed and depressed," she told me, boringly waving a hand away. "You have to find a way to deal with it." Other senior faculty members blithely volunteered these useful tidbits: "Oh, well, no one ever died from getting a Ph.D." Or, "You just need to get on with your work." In my experience, sympathetic souls concerned about students' mental health are rare, often those outsider professors on the sidelines who have chosen to live normal, balanced lives.

Messages of support are, unsurprisingly, often mixed and unhelpful. For instance, "dealing with it" commonly means taking a night or maybe a week off before promptly returning to your schedule; such a directive implies avoiding both your emotions and professional help. Furthermore, flippant remarks about "everyone being in the same boat" do not acknowledge the prevalence of depression and anxiety, let alone the fragile mental health of many graduate students, which Colleen Flaherty has referred to as a crisis ("Mental Health Crisis" and "A Very Mixed Record"). In fact, the rate of depression and anxiety in graduate students may be at least six times higher than in the general population. Also, according to a 2019 editorial in *Nature*, in the publication's biennial survey of 6,300 international doctoral students, 36% of the respondents admitted to anxiety or depression ("The Mental Health of PhD Researchers"). Immersed in this culture, I didn't realize my mental distress until the tipping point of my mother's death.

The causes of this purported mental health crisis are hotly contested. Flaherty has attributed it to "social isolation, the often abstract nature of the work and feelings of inadequacy—not to mention the slim tenure-track job market" ("Mental Health Crisis"). Further investigating the problem, *Nature Human Behaviour* published a series of 28 blogs and columns in which various academics discussed the connection between stressed and anxious PhD students and dysfunctional academic culture. Common conclusions were that the pressure to publish or perish, the dwindling number of tenure-track jobs, unhealthy relationships with advisors, and the lack of support for alternative academic careers were placing unhealthy burdens on graduate students ("PhDs Under Publication Pressure"). The emphasis on performance, which in my case meant drafting a book review at your dying mother's bedside, contributes to mental health issues in fledgling academics.

This pressure to perform and publish has a deeper cause: the normalized workaholic culture of graduate school and academia in general. In my second semester, a respected professor explained that if graduate students *really care*, they must constantly push themselves. They are, she stressed, meant to be working 60-hour-plus weeks, making sacrifices for their research, their programs, and their advisors. They should be willingly forfeiting their mental and physical health to accomplish work that matters. This attitude was later seconded by a high-ranking graduate-school administrator, who sent a passive aggressive email reminding students of their fifty-plus-hour-a-week work obligation, which was tied to the university's most generous funding.

Graduate school even made my running, my only nonwork pastime, seem frivolous, a symptom of a weak academic commitment. Surprised students and professors alike would comment on my daily workouts. "When do you have the time?" they asked, hinting that I must be scrimping on my work. (Just this past year, I revised a dissertation chapter until 4:30 p.m. on Christmas Eve.) The dissertation process necessarily entailed creating circuitous routes that avoided my advisor's neighborhood for fear of being seen as goofing off. Grinding out runs became more stressful than joyful. Graduate school condones this abnormal guilt because academics often pay only lip service themselves to work-life balance. Students, then, might feel ashamed to step away from the books to maintain their mental and physical health.

Still, any challenge to academia's culture of overwork must be accompanied by transparent moves to eliminate the stigma surrounding not only taking time off but also admitting mental unwellness. My wounds took overly long to heal because making adequate time for my grief and confessing my depression would have been embarrassing. Many academics might also be afraid of admitting their mental health struggles because of fears of losing promotions or of being negatively judged by colleagues. The dread of appearing vulnerable is passed down to their graduate students, who are reluctant to discuss their mental health with their seemingly stoical superiors.

And when my defeat *was* finally admitted, there was nowhere to turn. That is, my situation was aggravated by both my department's and my university's minimal mental health resources for graduate students. At the time of this writing, there is no content in our program's handbook about coping with traumatic events or about strategies for maintaining mental health. The category "Graduate Student Resources" includes information about the program's office, student mentors, professional-development seminars, reading groups, job-placement assistance, writing and technology resources, and the library. In short, this handbook sends the message that the only necessary ingredients for student success are academic and financial. The missing wellness content also suggests that either mental health issues do not exist or they are not *legitimate* concerns.

When I recently accessed the graduate student website, it fared no better. On the page for the most relevant student information, the first link was "Bill Payment," followed by employment opportunities and financial assistance. The alphabetization unfortunately placed "Student Life" at the bottom, which then opened up a page revealing a happy, relaxed student sitting with a dog amidst a sunny, grassy setting, an idealized image of the work-life balance the site itself ignores. After "Get Involved" and "Explore," there are some generic university-wide links to medical support and "counselling and wellness services."

In contrast, the generic student page, usually accessed by undergraduates, features a large, central button for "Counselling and Wellness Services." The implied message is clear: undergraduates, we take your health and wellness seriously; graduates, not so much. Whereas university administrators tend to their flock of undergraduates, alert to any signs of mental distress, graduate students are supposed to be dispirited, teetering on the edge of demoralization.

A further problem exists with university-wide mental wellness services: graduate students, whose assistantships are tenuous at best, might be reluctant to access these resources for fear of encountering those they teach. The whiff of mental illness might undermine graduate teaching assistants' credibility in the classroom, making their lives even more challenging.

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When my friend Terry read a draft of this essay, he alarmingly expressed, "Holy Crap! . . . If you took this work environment and put in any other industry, there would be never-ending human-resources meetings that tried to fix this problem. The whole environment reminds me of the tale of Sisyphus." Unfortunately, that rock is still being rolled up the hill; there are no plans to overhaul toxic academic culture any time soon. The best grad students can do is learn how to survive it.

Therefore, my essay ends with an urgent plea for all readers who are out there suffering and who have suffered to recognize my story as an object lesson. You may find that advisors and faculty are unsympathetic. You may find, like me, that your own intransigent nature too easily embraces the workaholic culture of your program and too easily neglects your mental health. Even if wellness resources do exist, you might be ashamed to admit your need of them.

Although resisting academia's unhealthy culture is difficult, please try to allocate a healthy time and space for your mental wellness. If your problems and your circumstances make you reluctant to speak with your advisor, venture outside your circle and search out other students, faculty, administrators, and relatives who seem sympathetic. Connect with those who recognize that your feelings are genuine and not easy excuses for procrastination. Ask for extensions and for extra time; choose a genuine respite and not a temporary stop; talk to professionals; take any necessary medication. Budge that recalcitrant dial of culture change.

Revisiting my mother's death while drafting, writing, and revising this essay has slowly forced both a recognition and a necessary shift. I have reluctantly accepted my identity as an introverted, partially depressed, workaholic recluse who has chosen academia because she will always find more comfort in books (and in dogs) than in people. Now, though, when I feel like escaping the academic world, even if it is not often enough, I heed my body and my mind. When the fear of wasting time surfaces during my runs, I duly silence it by pounding out an extra mile.

Now that the Ph.D. is completed, most days have more sun, but there are still shadows. But when that sorrow spills, I no longer turn off the valve but instead allow myself to cry for those family members who were never fully mourned. When sadness overcame me while revising this essay, for instance, the keyboard was abandoned so tears could roll, blamelessly.

My friend and semiretired colleague, Karla, one of the most selfless, balanced professors I know, one of those rare academics who has always willingly made time for many students, causes, and committees, confessed something surprising recently: she cries every day, for as long as necessary, and then calmly gets on with her tasks. (She also knits and loafs and wallows whenever the spirit moves her.) These tears have admittedly been more frequent in these unsettled and stressful COVID times, she admits, yet she still sheds them for the sake of her mental health. Sage words, indeed, not only for academics, but for all of us.

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# Making Space for What Lies in the Interstices: The Composing Practices of Single Moms

**Alex Hanson**

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**Abstract**

"Making Space…" asks readers to consider how we can broaden our understanding of what counts as composition practice and work when we make space for the composition experiences of those with marginalized identities, specifically single moms. Using testimonios to share the composition practices of single moms in higher education, the author shares how the composition process of single moms is one of improvisation, of finding a way to make space for composition work, and of pushing boundaries of what a composing process looks like and what it means.

**Keywords**

composition practice, process, single mothers, *testimonios*

I sit in front of my computer, trying to transcribe the last 15 minutes of an interview. At this point, I've done almost 18 hours of interview audio totaling 250 pages, and I am ready to be done. I feel so close to finishing this transcript, but I have something, or rather, *someone* else vying for my attention—my 5 ½-year-old daughter, Olivia. After she gets home from school, she wants me to play with her, to engage in her role-playing game in which she will reenact what happened that day. "Just let me finish this transcript, and then I'll be happy to play with you," I tell her, while also encouraging her to do whatever she wants until I am done. Instead of going off to do her own thing, she climbs under the dining table and into my lap, listening to the audio and quickly picking up on how my Esc key is my Play and Pause button. She is wiggly, anxious, and to her, 5 minutes feels like an eternity. I know this transcription will take at least 30.

Her little pointer finger lingers above the Esc key as I type, as she integrates herself into the workflow. "Go ahead and push it," I say, as I get to a point at which I need to pause the audio. She does, and after doing this a few times, starts to feel courageous. She reaches for a letter key, a *t* and then a *p* before I tell her to stop. She begins to slump down, arms crossed, and then whispers in my ear, "Can I tell you a secret?"

"Of course," I say.

"Are you mad at me?"

"No, honey. I'm not mad at you. This transcript has just taken me all day to do, and I wouldn't want you to accidentally undo all of that work by pressing the wrong key, that's all. I'm not mad at you. I love you." I hug her and then ask her if she'll go back to being my assistant, to pushing the Esc key for me. She does. And after half an hour of this, of her and me pushing keys, of her asking questions about the voice coming from my computer, of her trying to match the words from that voice with the words on my computer screen, we finish and move away from the computer and into the world of her kindergarten classroom where she had a substitute teacher for the day who made promises of s'mores for snacks and candy math games.

This is a snapshot of my composition life, a glimpse into a world where, even as I desperately try to finish all my writing when my daughter is gone, I still continually fall

short of my goal. She is an only child. Her dad and I are divorced. Livy and I have been doing this work-life dance for the past three years, one in which she is the Esc key to my composing, in which her absence and presence determine how, when, and where I write, or if I do at all. My experience reflects the composition practices of other single moms across disciplines, academic ranks, and geographic locations. In an interview with *Art Lit Lab*, Kate Vieira describes how her identity as a single parent shapes the way she completes her writing, how she writes first thing in the morning but tries not to work "in the evenings or on the weekends" because that is precious time with her daughter, time for the two of them to "irritate the bejeesus out of each other." She acknowledges that in the moments when she does need to write and her daughter is there, writing time is limited—"Sometimes I have 30 minutes. Sometimes it's a couple hours. It's sacred." Vieira's perspective offers an initial glimpse into what the composing experience of a single parent is like.

Within composition and rhetoric, we don't often see into the writing experiences of people with marginalized identities. While there was substantial scholarship on the process movement from 1976 to 1995, as Pamela Takayoshi points out, conversations around the topic have fallen into a lull since, with occasional process studies scholarship coming to the surface, like that of Paul Prior and Jody Shipka, Theresa Lillis, and most recently, Christine Tulley. Such work explores academic writers' composition practices—how those writers get work done. Oftentimes, these studies involve interviews with students or writing scholars, who talk about the strategies and methods they implement throughout their composition process (see Rogers). Occasionally, such studies also involve longitudinal work that follows student writers, or other methods, like asking participants to create visual representations of their writing processes (see Prior and Shipka). Within this work, one "interstitial gap"—"the unheard, unthought, the unspoken"—is evidenced through the absence of single parents, and more specifically, single mothers (Pérez 5). Tulley acknowledges that looking at how gender affects writing within rhetoric and composition "is essential" (153). Her emphasis on this need comes from not only an absence of attention to the topic but also the relationship between gender and parenting and how women are often disproportionately impacted in their writing "due to the birth of children[1]" (153). While single parents as a whole face professional challenges related to their parental identity, this article focuses on single moms because they represent the majority of single parents in the United States and because of their marginalization ("America's Families"; Sidel 22-23). Additionally, such perspectives are important because they broaden the pool of knowledge from which teachers, administrators, and scholars can draw to make sense of writing experiences across identities, and as Pamela Takayoshi argues, "If teachers of writing are to effectively help writers learn to be effective and productive in contemporary academic and non-academic contexts, then we need to know what composing demands writers must negotiate" (573). The composing demands of single parents call for a feminist understanding of composition practice, one that takes into consideration how lived experience, material reality, and the personal shape what composition practice looks like in and out of the classroom.

Tricia, Julie, and Danielle[2] are three single moms whose composition practices indicate the value of paying attention to what is often unseen and beyond our control as writers. What follows are their stories, stories I was fortunate to learn about through interviews conducted with them over the course of a semester. While I interviewed seven single moms, I have chosen to focus on these three women because of how they represent a range of experiences—a divorced single mom PhD student on medical leave for the past year who shares custody with her son's dad, a divorced single mom working at a community college who has sole custody of her two children, and a single mom by choice completing her bachelor's degree while working full time and raising her son. Their stories push and expand our thinking about what counts as composition practice, why composition practice does not happen, and how composition practices in and out of the classroom can be valuable resources. I tell their stories using *testimonios*, described by the Latina Feminist Group as "a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure" (2). Like the Latina Feminist Group, I see *testimonios* as a way for participants to bear witness to their experiences as single mothers in academia, and through the sharing of their stories, to represent not just what has happened in their personal lives but also what has happened to them as a community (13). I recognize that I take up this methodology as a white woman writing about the experiences of single mothers who may or may not identify as Latinx. In doing so, my intention is not to conflate the experiences of these two groups or the stakes of erasure that the Latina Feminist Collective describes. Instead, as a methodology, I see *testimonios* offering a unique, decolonial way of sharing the lived experiences of those who have been marginalized. It is a methodology that allows single moms' stories to be part of a collective, rather than functioning as individual, separate narratives. This collectivity reveals how the challenges of single moms are communal not individualistic, strengthening the need to support these women as a group.

1 Tulley also emphasizes the need to consider how race "affects writing within rhetoric and composition" and acknowledges that women are disproportionately impacted as a result of "caring for aging parents" as well (153).

2 The information these women shared was part of an IRB approved study. To adhere to the IRB requirements, participants' names and other identifying details have been changed to maintain their anonymity. To ensure that the participants were comfortable with how they were represented, I provided each one with a draft of this article before I submitted it to *WCC* for consideration. They all okayed it, suggesting two minor changes (one related to the number of students enrolled in a class, and another related to the use of blogs).

I have chosen to write these women's stories from their perspectives, using data from our interview conversations to weave together their narratives. In this way, my intention is to honor their stories as told by them, and as Jillian Duquaine-Watson writes in her own research about single mothers, to "promote increased attention to the specific ways participants construct their narratives, including the specific discourses they use to describe their lives and experiences" (41). Intertwined with their narratives is my analytical perspective of their stories. To make clear where their voices occur in the text, I block quote their words. I also use subheaders to indicate when a new single mom's story occurs.

## TRICIA'S STORY

When I talked with Tricia, many things struck me in our conversation. Her passion for her research, which focuses on a wearable medical device that centers mental healthcare, is evident in how she finds ways to bring it into the discussion even when you might not be expecting it. Her academic interests are broad—she majored in bioengineering, minored in writing and rhetoric, and is currently pursuing a PhD in information science and technology. She's a single mom with shared custody, an academic, and an army veteran who completed a tour in Iraq. But what struck me most about Tricia is her resourcefulness and her resilience. For example, when Tricia first started college, she was commuting two hours one way. After she dropped her son off at daycare, she would go to work, glancing at cheat sheets for exams during her drive, and she created her own audiobooks by recording herself reading chapters and playing them back on the trip. As she told me, "I imagine Homer Simpson in his car with his toaster and everything; as a single parent, you're trying to create this multitool where you're able to do all of these wonderful things at once and change the baby's diaper." Similarly, when Tricia went on medical leave shortly into her PhD program, she found alternative ways to complete her academic work as she dealt with photophobia and screen intolerance. Tricia's resourcefulness and resilience are informed in part by her identity as a single mother, which has required her to find ways to get work done, even when that feels impossible.

When Tricia became a single parent three years into her bachelor's degree, she began to feel the strain of her parental identity, which she compared to "having two full-time jobs without a day off. It's just work, work, work all the time." As she struggled to keep up with her schoolwork, she became increasingly aware of how her experience as a single mom shaped her approach to academic work.

> It was all I could do to keep up with my schoolwork, much less research on top of it. I don't have time to be the rock star supermom that I want to be and be concerned about how my child is developing and growing. You have to cut some corners. Rather than focusing on my studies and getting straight As, I'm okay with having a B and having an extra four hours of my time every week. When you're in academia, always in the back of your mind you're focusing on what you have to do. You can never really shut that off completely and focus on other things when you're supposed to be performing those roles. I've been on medical leave for almost two years, and I still have that anxiety related to academic roles.

Even with "cutting corners," Tricia has found a way to maintain a presence in her various roles: as a veteran, she goes to veterans' social events; as an undergrad, she regularly completed her academic projects, had a strong presence in her research labs, and received multiple university-wide awards for her work; as a single mom, she supported her son as he learned to play an instrument and supports him now as he participates in martial arts. Despite this involvement, her presence is not without sacrifices. She has had to adjust the expectations she has for herself as a student and single mom so she can do the work of both. Knowing about Tricia's experiences as a veteran, an academic, and a single mom are important because they make visible how Tricia has continuously found a way to perform her various roles despite the constraints she encounters. She has experience doing this kind of work, which means that when she ended up on medical leave, unable to read or write, she had a self-created blueprint for finding a way she could reference.

Tricia's two-year medical leave is the result of a two-minute interaction with her service dog. As she tells it,

> I was in my bedroom with my music on, doing a happy dance, excited about going to visit a fellow researcher outside of the country during spring break, when I bent down to love on my dog, to pet her. I didn't know that I was going to hit my head on the corner of my bed, but I did. I don't really do happy dances anymore; the last one changed so much about my life.

It seems clichéd to say so much about life can change in an instant, but Tricia's experience is just that. I'm not sure how often in academia we're prepared for these moments, the ones when someone's life drastically shifts and the way they used to do things is not the way they can do them anymore. We've gotten a glimpse into that as we've tried to adjust due to the COVID 19 pandemic, and in some ways, that reveals how messy and challenging responding to a sudden shift can be. Now imagine having to make that type of adjustment on your own, with a 10-year-old child, while also adjusting to life with a disability. That has been Tricia's experience.

> Now, I have photophobia and screen intolerance and some inflammation on the left side of my head. I used to read and write a lot, but since I've been on medical leave, I've been unable to. I am a writer, but I can't write. At first, I tried to

> read just to catch up on my schoolwork because I thought I was going to get better right away. I would read for like 20 minutes, and then I had to sleep for two hours directly after because it exhausted me so much. I have notebooks, I have pen and paper, but when I try to go back to read and edit them, it's painful, so I just kind of gave up. Instead, what I've been doing is painting. Paint is much easier for me. When I'm painting, the pain doesn't go away. The pain is constant. It just isn't aggravated or increased. My walls are full of paintings now, and I have lots of paintings (in acrylic) that have mostly words on them.
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> There are aphorisms in there, there are engineering equations, there are movements, and there are arrows. Rhetoric is one of the words that's in one of my paintings. One of my paintings says "Information." It was upside down. I flip them around because they don't really have sides, and when you flip them around, you can see different things in them. It's almost like a brain mapping, and a lot of it has to do with my research and trying to figure out a way to move forward with my thought processes. Some of it is listening to audiobooks and just me responding to them because that's what I used to do before I hit my head. I was kind of more like on autopilot listening to audiobooks, kind of wanting to take notes or at least responding and jotting stuff down that I thought was really important at the time, and then it kind of gets mixed in with reflections and different experiences.
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> It's really hard when you're a writer, and you hit your head, and you become disabled, and you're not able to write anymore. Writing has been my outlet since I was a teenager; I used to keep journals and diaries or whatever; that's the tool I've always used, and it was taken from me.

Tricia is not only a graduate student veteran, she is also a single mom, and as a single mom, she has developed strategies and ways of doing work that are reflected in her current practice. Just as Tricia found a way to do work during her two-hour commute, she now uses painting to process and reflect on her research and turns to audiobooks to continue reading. She is doing this on her own. When Tricia went on medical leave, she became what she termed "a ghost in the background," someone who is unacknowledged, whose only means to maintain contact with students and faculty in her academic program is through a method that causes pain. Looking at screens hurts. Fluorescent lights hurt. This pain eliminates the potential for email, text messaging, and, often, meeting in person, which meant that if Tricia wanted to continue her academic work, she was left to find a way on her own. Her experience reveals how academia can be exclusionary, and how we are all vulnerable to being excluded at any time, as well as the limitations of academia when it comes to composition. While Tricia can compose through painting, and she can talk at length about her research, she is unable to participate in her PhD program because looking at screens and reading or writing on paper is painful, despite her deeply engrained identity as a writer and academic. Tricia's experience begs the question, How might we broaden our conception of composition practice to make space for the unexpected challenges people of all subjectivities encounter? When Tricia told me about her painting experience, she also shared her painting process, which reflects the composing process she had while writing.

> When I paint, I improvise. I pick a color that I feel like at the moment, and I just kind of have to fill up the canvas until it's not blank anymore, and sometimes as I'm kind of slapping paint around the canvas, something shows up or comes to my mind, like I'll picture something in the canvas, and then I'll paint that into it. I call it improvisation. Before I went on medical leave, my writing process was pretty much like what I do when I paint—I didn't necessarily have a plan, I'd just sit down and start doing it. I wrote into or through my ideas. Then, my ideas would come out in conversation, too. It always helps me to talk to different researchers and different people because that's when my random ideas will come up, and I would write them down real fast.

There needs to be space for composing practices like Tricia's in higher education, space for students who may face an unexpected change in life circumstances but find innovative ways to engage in intellectual work despite that change. Tricia's way of working is different, but that does not mean her way is any less valuable, meaningful, or beneficial to her research. Focusing on what she can do—have thoughtful, in-depth telephone conversations, express and process ideas through painting, and listen to audiobooks—is a starting point for including Tricia in academia despite the constraints of what counts and is valued in higher education. Tricia may not be in composition and rhetoric, but are there ways ideas from composition and rhetoric might be used to inform and develop a broader understanding of what it means to complete composition work in other disciplines? For example, Shipka, drawing on Kathleen Yancey's 2014 article "Looking for Sources of Coherence in a Fragmented World," describes composition as "a thing with parts—with visual-verbal or multimodal aspects—the expression of relationships and, perhaps most importantly, the result of complex, ongoing processes that are shaped by, and provide shape for, living" (17). Tricia's composition process, which is deeply influenced by her material practice, lived reality, and embodied experience, fits Shipka's definition. Her paintings are things with parts that express relationships among what she listens to, researches, and experiences.

## JULIE'S STORY

Just listening to all the things Julie does had me feeling exhausted. She works at a community college where she teaches a 6/6 load, mentors new online and hybrid teachers, and coadvises a transfer partnership with a nearby R1. She also teaches an exercise

class at a local YMCA and has full custody of her two children, which means coordinating multiple schedules and extracurricular activities. In addition, for six years prior to our conversations, she had worked on her PhD in English while continuing to work full time at the community college where she currently teaches. Her decision to pursue a doctorate while working full time was out of necessity: "Otherwise, I would have had to make a choice between finishing the PhD and feeding the kids. You just can't feed kids on a grad stipend." Given Julie's constant activity, it should come as no surprise that she is highly organized, as she explained to me:

> For better or worse, I've always been really Type A. Those have only become strengths as a single parent; it's how I manage the household with the kids. I also have a [ridiculously] color-coded calendar in my phone that I use to keep track of everything; if it's not in my phone, it doesn't exist. I've always been a fairly scheduled person, but because I'm a single mom, I'm very scheduled with my composition work. When I had a functional partner in the house, I had the freedom of being able to go into work if I needed to do something, or stay up extra late to complete whatever it is I'm writing and knowing someone will be there in the morning to take care of the kids. With my dissertation, I had set writing times, but the mom guilt was overwhelming at times. In fact, part of my acknowledgments in my dissertation are a bit of an apology to my kids, like, "Thanks for being patient for all of the times I had to say, 'I'm sorry. This Saturday is mine; I cannot do anything.'" I was able to finish my dissertation because I got a very unexpected fellowship. It could have turned easily into, I can't do this anymore. I can't work all day and come home and take care of my kids and their needs and write all night and still be a sane functioning human being. Now, the only time I get to myself is after the kids go to bed, and the older they get, the shorter that window gets. If they're not going to bed until 9:30 or 10:00, I get maybe 30 minutes, and that can be hard. Now that I'm done with the PhD, I have set work times, which is how I get my work here done. I also have had a very longstanding personal policy that when I go home for the day, work does not come with me. I get all of my work done while I'm at work. If it doesn't get done during my workday, it doesn't get done that day. Y'all can email me at 9:00 at night; I'm not responding. I tell my colleagues and students, "I am on campus from this to this, and so you can get responses from me in that time." But I'm not checking my email on Sunday morning. I'm not taking anything with me when I go to the beach for the day.

Julie's experience shows how writing is shaped by context. She's protective of the little time she has for herself, and she creates boundaries between her work and personal life to protect that time. Much of this is because she is a single mom. She recognizes that with a functional partner, the space and opportunities for writing are different—she could stay up late, return to work to finish something, or leave for a few hours on the weekend to work on a project. However, now that she is a single mom, these spaces and opportunities are no longer available. As a PhD student, when Julie had to write for the degree, she found time as a single mom, but that wasn't without the cost of guilt. Writing required the cooperation and understanding of her children, cooperation and understanding that was as crucial to the writing process as a keyboard and a screen. What afforded her the time, a finite resource for single parents, was something not everyone gets—a fellowship. Many academics would benefit from such an opportunity, but as a single mom, this assistance was especially precious for Julie. Her experience makes evident the importance of administrators and faculty selecting fellowship recipients based not only on merit but also on need. Otherwise, there's a higher risk of attrition.

Since Julie has completed her dissertation, her academic writing is "in a lull right now." She tried to write after the dissertation, but when she sat down, she struggled—"I was just like 'I'm still not there.' My brain is just starting to bounce back. I'm kind of in the in-between stage, coming up for air right now." Because Julie teaches at a community college, writing for scholarship is not rewarded—"I won't get a promotion or a raise or a title or anything else if I publish 15 books." For Julie, this is "the biggest hurdle" to completing writing for publication; it has no bearing on her position, income, or responsibilities as a faculty member. In some ways, her position affords her an opportunity to enjoy the time she hasn't had since 2012 when she started her doctoral program: "It's just been really nice to go home and not have writing hanging over my head. I'm trying to enjoy the time I have." In a culture where there is a constant push to be productive, to "publish or perish," Julie's perspective creates space to recognize how part of the composition process is not composing but instead taking a break to breathe, relax, and enjoy the time rather than seeing it as something to be filled with academic work. Despite not completing writing for scholarship, Julie is still engaged in a substantial amount of composition work, or what she terms "work-related writing."

> Because I teach a 6/6 load, I'm constantly doing course prep, part of which includes closed captioning videos that I use. I also do some report writing and administrative writing for my work with the transfer partnership program at the nearby R1. I've been doing some revamp work for all of my classes that I teach, and I teach five potentially different classes at any given moment.

In addition to the course prep, administrative writing, and course design, Julie also does a substantial amount of written feedback, the kind that comes with a 6/6 teaching load of writing classes ranging from 22 to 25 students across academic levels and experiences. She is engaging extensively in what Barbara K. Townsend and Vicki J. Rosser term "scholarly activity" (670). This scholarly activity is evidenced through Julie's redesign of courses—her willingness to update courses she has previously taught drawing on recent knowledge she has acquired—as well as her approach to feedback on student writing, which evolves with the students

she teaches, and her mentorship of new online instructors. Her experience encourages a reconsideration of how productivity is measured, what counts, and what is rewarded.

Even though Julie isn't producing publications right now, she knows how she works best—collaboratively and in response to CFPs. She has multiple joint projects with coauthors on "the back burner"—two are finishing their dissertations, and at the time of our conversation, another was applying for a tenure-track position and is also a single mom. For Julie, collaborative work is helpful because it builds in accountability; the same applies to CFPs.

> Part of the reason why I think I've been struggling with the collaborative projects that I have is that these are projects driven by us without an acceptance or deadline from somebody else. If I know I've gotta turn something in to a journal by March, I'll start writing, but if it's just me and my friends playing around with an idea, well, that can always wait. If I'm going to work on a journal article by myself, I might let that rot for a while because nobody else is looking for it from me; it hasn't been accepted by anybody. It's just one of those things I float into the universe. What I like about book chapters instead is that I have accountability to my editors. They've got hard deadlines. I give them a proposal and they either accept it or reject it. That makes for a more structured work environment for me.

Unfortunately, the value of collaborative work is still contested in composition and rhetoric, yet we see from Julie how important collaboration can be for academic publications depending on your context (Daniel and Sura). The privileging of single-authored texts is evidenced in graduate school, where students are encouraged and expected to write single-authored research papers and dissertations, and then continues into faculty positions where, as Kristine Blair explains, "'The emphasis is still on the single-authored monograph and what that has to look like and who has to publish it'" (qtd. in Tulley 143). Privileging single-authored texts creates an unequal environment for academics, one in which individuals with particular material circumstances and embodied experiences are more likely to be rewarded and recognized for their work than others. Recognizing that collaboratively authored articles, books, and other academic scholarship require a unique set of skills and also create space for those who may be excluded when publication opportunities are limited to single-authored texts creates space for voices that may have been marginalized by traditional publishing standards, expectations, and norms. Julie's lack of academic publishing is not due to a lack of motivation or interest.

> I have more things to work on than I have time to do them. I'd like to do something with the dissertation, either chopping it up or figuring out something to do with it. I've got some calls for book chapters that I'm interested in, and I've also got a couple of things that some colleagues of mine and I have been thinking about doing, edited collections, as well. None of those projects are off the ground, but they're all things that kind of keep churning in the back of my head when I think about what I want to do.

Julie's story illustrates how someone can have the skills of a productive scholarly writer—organization, scheduling, and careful planning—yet still not complete what she refers to as "academic writing," the kind that often gains recognition and praise in composition and rhetoric. Being a single mom at a community college shapes what Julie can do, how she does it, and why she chooses to do it (or not). Her experiences push against traditional ideas of what constitutes writing productivity, particularly as it relates to research.

Through Julie we see the importance of paying attention to and valuing the kind of composition work that occurs outside publications. Julie's experience also provides insight into how a single parent at a community college completes composition work—two areas Tulley asserts need greater research (152-53). When we consider the writing process, we must consider not only time, space, and material resources but also people and how they can create affordances and/or constraints for writing.

## DANIELLE'S STORY

One thing that was continually evident during the conversations I had with Danielle was the love she has for her son. She shared with me how she supported him after his first heartbreak, ensured he got to and from soccer practice, and had comforting conversations with him when he would call her from summer school. Danielle made clear, even though she didn't need to, that her son is her top priority: "At the end of the day his needs for me to be his mom outweigh any- and everything." From the beginning of Danielle's college experience, it has been just the two of them. She's currently working on her bachelor's degree part time, living with a brain injury, and also working full time as a paralegal; her son has ADHD. Her experience as a single-mom undergraduate "has been difficult, stressful, exhausting, frustrating, tense, but it has also been an outlet." Recently, Danielle took an introductory writing class online, which she found especially helpful to her as a single mom because "the online part-time option allows [her] to spend time as a mom and do work when [her] son is sleeping or after he is taken care of."

When Danielle started the introductory writing course, she was really upset about having to take the class because as a paralegal she has a fair amount of professional writing experience. She knew how to write independently, how to advocate for a change in writing style when she didn't like the way it sounded, and how to communicate with a range of people in the judicial system.

> I write on a day-to-day level to very important people—correspondence to judges, courts both federal and civil,

> attorneys, physicians—drafting subpoenas, pleadings, discovery, motions. I took a paralegal course to learn how to do the kind of writing I do for my job. When I started doing paralegal writing, I was like, "This sounds like you're a caveman. This sounds awful." I had to change the way I was writing to make it sound like caveman talk, so I asked at the firm, "Can I just make this sound a little bit better? Because I don't want to sound like a caveman anymore." The attorney gave me free rein to do what I wanted. He was super lenient because I think he just didn't want to do it, and then realized I'm actually pretty good at it.
>
> In the writing I do at work, there have been times where I was given something and expected to produce a document with little to no direction or planning. Sometimes, I'll meet with a group of attorneys to discuss what needed to be done. For example, I recently met with three attorneys to discuss a legal process. I gathered and produced documents for review and then went back to make corrections. There are some legal writings I do without seeking feedback, and it would be rather cumbersome to do so. In my writing class, the primary differences between workshopping and my writing for work is in the context, as you cannot compare meeting with legal professionals to meeting with your academic peers because their thought processes are on different levels.
>
> In the writing class, we did visual analysis and reflection, and I learned a lot of different things, like blog writing, which I would not know how to do on my own. I didn't like it at first, I hated it, but once I finally got the grasp of blog writing, and what it was to draw people in, then I was able to pull it all together. It was a lot of work going into this thing. I'm proud of what I created, and I think it looks pretty cool.

Danielle's experience at work and in her writing course show traditional ideas of transfer—how the writing she does for work has prepared and influenced the writing she does for school. Even though she wished her professional writing had been given greater consideration when determining her writing requirement (she told me that she felt the curriculum needed more flexibility, that it was "set for a traditional student" and "very traditional in what it requires"), she still made the most of her writing class and recognized the way context shapes writing situations, particularly workshop conversations. Understanding the role of context in writing is something Linda Adler-Kassner, Irene Clark, Liane Robertson, Kara Taczak, and Kathleen Blake Yancey point to as a "threshold concept"[3] in transfer research. As a result of Danielle's introductory writing course and the writing she does professionally, she has a strong understanding of a foundational epistemology in academic writing. To put it another way, she recognizes that even though she may be engaged in a task work and school have in common—workshopping writing—the context shapes the way the workshop and her writing develop (Adler-Kassner et al. 25).

Danielle's experience also reflects the role her prior knowledge plays. We can see how her knowledge in one activity system—work—influences her composing in another—school. Danielle is bringing into the writing classroom a wealth of composition knowledge from the various contexts she composes in.

> In addition to writing for work and school, I also do a lot of written communication as far as email discussions between my child's school, the special education director, guidance counselor, and school-assigned social worker. While everything I compose at work allows me to think about my intended delivery and what I am trying to convey to the reader, it is my life experiences and being a single mom which allows me to put so much emotion behind the words I write.

Danielle's description of working across different systems is reflective of David Russell's activity theory, which shows how writing is shaped not just by tools and people but also by events (508). His focus on "the ways writing links school and society" makes activity theory a helpful lens for looking at Danielle's composition practice (509). More specifically, Danielle's story illustrates Russell's concept of "activity systems"[4] in that it shows how various systems—work, school, and family—can interact (510). Whether it is for her writing class, her job, or her son's school, Danielle recognizes the importance of audience and the people on the other side of the page or screen. We see this awareness in how she identifies the specific people she is writing to, as well as how she emphasizes what it meant to "draw people in" to her blog for her writing class. Her sense of audience awareness and purpose is shaped by her paralegal and single mom writing experiences, yet she felt as though this type of writing experience was not valued in the composition classroom. When any student enters a composition class, it's important to make space for the knowledge they bring with them. For a single mom whose time is limited, this space is especially important.

While she identifies her professional experience as the facet that "allows [her] to think about [her] intended delivery," it is her life experience as a single mom that allows her to put a great deal of emotion behind her work. How might we account for this embodied knowledge students carry with them and bring into our composition classrooms? By acknowledging how her single-mom identity is an asset to her writing, Danielle is challenging traditional ideas that often stigmatize single moms and perpetuate a culture in which

3 Adler-Kassner et al. describe the five threshold concepts as "ideas that are most important for writing in post-secondary institutions," in part because they allow writers to "distinguish one community of practice from another" (18-19).

4 Informed by Vygotsky's "cultural-historical activity theory," as well as "Bazerman's genre systems theory," Russell defines an activity system as "any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated interaction" (508, 510).

many single moms feel they need to remain silent about this part of themselves.

The connections between Danielle's single-mom identity and her writing are not only apparent in her composition process but also in her relationship with her son. When Danielle's son plagiarized, she used the writing she completed for her class to discuss plagiarism with him.

> He had to write a story, and he had his ideas, and he started writing this paragraph, but his teacher said, "It's very unique. It's really good, but you just have a little bit of grammar things to fix here and there," so I gave him my computer thinking he could just type out stuff. Well, he decided to go online, find a story, and then copied and pasted it and said, "This is mine." The teacher gave him multiple times to come clean because she knew it wasn't his. His teacher ended up calling me and saying that he's not going to get written up, but he's getting no points for the entire project. I knew I needed to talk to my son about what happened, but before I did, I had to figure out how to approach the conversation. I don't like to come at him without a lesson to be learned because I feel that's how you learn. You learn through lessons. You learn through your mistakes. I ended up going through my project on my blog and I had him read it, and I showed him, here are all the steps. It was like step 1 through 6. We had to keep revising over and over and over again. I showed him all the papers that I had scribbled on and written on and crumpled up and threw out—all of that. I took pictures of all of this, so that I could actually document it for a later project on my blog. With my brain injury, I have short-term memory loss, so documentation helps me remember all of the things I want to write about. Like sometimes, when I'm driving, I'll make voice memos on my phone so that I don't forget my ideas. The project I shared with my son was about a trip we had taken with other people, people who I saw as my community. My son read it, and he really liked it, and I said to him, "You know, I'd be really upset if somebody stole my work and said it was theirs," and we got into a discussion about stealing and why it's not right. When I showed him all those pictures I collaged, because it took me forever to get to my final product, I said, "Look at how hard I worked. I worked my butt off. This is many, many, many weeks of work, and for somebody to say that it was theirs, that would break my heart, that means my work was worthless." I asked him, "Why do you think that it was okay to take somebody else's work?"
>
> "Because mine didn't sound good."
>
> "The teacher said yours sounded pretty good. It sounded great, actually," I told him.
>
> "Well, I just wanted it to be the best."
>
> His self-esteem is very, very low. It always has been, ever since maybe first grade, and this is where it comes in. You keep going year after year and without any type of confidence boost, it's hard. Telling these kids that they're not good enough, they're going to do whatever it takes to be good enough, and if that means lying and cheating, they're gonna do it. It's not right. I'm hoping that doesn't happen again, but I get why it did.

Through Danielle's story, we see how the work she did in her introductory writing class became an asset to her in her personal life when she needed to teach her son about plagiarism. As instructors, we might not anticipate that students will use the writing in our classes in the way Danielle used hers—a tool for fostering empathy to teach a lesson.

Just as Danielle pays great attention to her audience in composing, she used her writing process to help her son consider the person on the other side of the page, the author. Research in rhetoric and composition has described strategies for plagiarism avoidance (Hartwig 2015; "Discouraging Plagiarism" 2020), as well as shown how faculty are trained to prevent plagiarism by learning how and when to "react (often in the form of judicial processes and procedures)" (Serviss 555). Danielle's identity as a single mom allowed her to approach teaching plagiarism to her son in another way, empathy with the original author. Such an approach resembles Sandra Jamieson's call to ask why students fail to "engage with ideas and formulate their own responses" instead of focusing on the student's "guilt" (106). Like Jamieson, Danielle saw her son's behavior as "an opportunity for pedagogical intervention, regardless of whether the plagiarism was intentional or 'accidental'" (106). In Danielle's experience, we see what can happen when plagiarism is seen as a pedagogical opportunity rather than a judicial one. Danielle's story shows the intertwined nature of the composition classroom, professional life, and lived experience. Her story touches on very familiar and well-researched aspects in composition—transfer and plagiarism in particular—yet her approach is not directly informed by them but instead by her lived experience. How might we account for the transfer of embodied knowledge in composition classes? If we approached teaching about plagiarism through empathy, what might happen? Danielle gives us a glimpse into what composition can look like when it incorporates a single-mom perspective.

## CONCLUSION

Prior to my divorce, I had substantial flexibility with my writing time; I wrote when I wanted to rather than when I had to. While I planned what I was going to write, I had to do less around planning when I actually wrote, and I could easily block out large chunks of time to get my writing done. Now, I have found I have to plan for when I won't be writing, for when my daughter will want to bake cupcakes or build a fort or walk around outside looking for "aminal" tracks in

the snow. I write as much as I can manage when I have the time in order to build a writing cushion for the time I'll spend with her and no writing gets done because, like Kate Vieira, that time with my daughter is precious; it's a chance for us to "irritate the bejeesus out of each other." The composition process of a single mom is one of improvisation, of finding a way to make space for composition work, and of pushing the boundaries of what a composing process looks like and what it means.

Being a single mom means you often must figure things out as they come, which is reflected in the ways Tricia, Julie, and Danielle compose. Tricia had already developed certain ways of composing, of engaging in academic work, because of her single-mom identity. When she sustained a head injury, leaving her unable to type or hand write, she found another way—painting. Julie is highly skilled at organization, time management, and prioritizing tasks because, as a single mom, she is managing her own demanding schedule, as well as the schedules of both her children and their family pets. These skills were part of the reason she was able to finish her dissertation, but they're also part of the reason her academic writing has currently been on hold. When academic writing was no longer a requirement, she was able to reallocate it on her priority list while also accepting and understanding that decision. Danielle's single-mom identity has given her a combination of embodied and rhetorical knowledge that is reflected in the relationships among her professional writing, her academic writing and her personal life. Her sense of audience awareness and context informs how she approaches interpersonal actions in workshops with peers, meetings with attorneys, and conversations with her son.

When we look at the composing processes of individuals, we can see how, where, and when they compose, as well as what habits and skills they have developed to get their writing done. Such information can inform how we understand, make sense of, and value different types of composition, and in turn how we teach, mentor, and support students, colleagues, and peers. The composition practices of single moms push us to think about what is possible when we are open to what can happen with composition practice and production. Even though our understanding of the writing process of those with marginalized identities is limited, these stories make clear the wealth of what can be learned by making space for what still lies in the interstices.

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**Acknowledgements**

*Thank you to the single mom participants for trusting me with your stories; this work is built from your voices and wouldn’t exist without you. I am so grateful to the anonymous reviewers, both single parents, whose time and feedback helped strengthen this work. I also greatly appreciate the editors of* WCC *for their generosity, support, and patience. The work of Jessica and Gabby Spruill made this work possible—thank you for providing the kind of care for Livy that gave me pockets of uninterrupted writing time. Finally, thank you to my sister, Becky, whose invitation to dog sit came at just the right time to draft this article.*

# "Abandon This Palace of Language:" On the Rhetoric of the Body in *A Yellow Silence*

**Katie Marya** **David Winter**

Katie Marya is a poet and translator originally from Atlanta, Georgia. She earned an MFA in poetry from Bennington College and is currently pursuing a PhD in creative writing at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. Her work has appeared in *North American Review*, *Guernica*, *Waxwing*, and other publications. She was the recipient of the 2018 James Dickey Prize for Poetry at *Five Points* and has received fellowships from the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts and Nebraska Arts Council. Her first collection of poetry, *Sugar Work*, is forthcoming from Alice James Books in 2022.

David Winter's work has appeared in *The Baffler*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Meridian*, *Ninth Letter*, *Poetry International*, *TriQuarterly*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*. He is the author of the poetry chapbook *Safe House* (Thrush Press, 2013). His interviews with other poets have appeared in *The Journal*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, and as a Poetry Foundation Web feature. David received his MFA from The Ohio State University, an Individual Excellence Award from the Ohio Arts Council, and a Stadler Fellowship from Bucknell University. He is currently a doctoral student in creative writing at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln.

**Abstract**
This dialogue reflects on *A Yellow Silence*, which was a collaborative, sonic, intertextual, outdoor art installation based primarily on the poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik. We discuss our experiences of embodiment and identity, feminist theories of silence, and the nature of interdisciplinary collaboration.

**Keywords**
rhetoric, embodiment, poetry, feminism, queer

## A BLUE WOMAN SHAPES A PREMONITION

LUIS OTHONIEL ROSA

When I[1] first imagined *A Yellow Silence*, it was from some desire to construct a physical and collaborative kind of poetry. I was theorizing about silence, listening, the body, and agency, though I did not fully realize it at the time. I was theorizing "because I was hurting," as bell hooks articulates, and because "I was desperately trying to discover the place of my belonging" while going through a divorce (2). So much of my experience of separation and divorce was about trying to discern if I was wrong for wanting to end it. *A Yellow Silence* was about creating a space where the question of blame did not exist, or at least did not rule—not because I wanted to forgo responsibility and assume some position of innocence but because I could not register why my body felt so terrible in a marriage to a person I loved.

1 Though we composed this essay as a kind of dialogue, our decision to write in the first person without clearly indicating to whom the pronoun *I* refers at any given moment was motivated by a desire to disrupt normative perceptions of identity and authorship and to reflect the fluidity that existed between us as we talked and wrote. We are indebted to Haneen Ghabra and Bernadette Marie Calafell for demonstrating the possibility of this formal choice in their essay "From failure and allyship to feminist solidarities: negotiating our privileges and oppressions across borders."

Cornerstone

go to the sink
self wanted order
find it
refrain there
resembling a place
place brief down on a train
in where encounter centers high treachery
spine that could not begin
where fusion placed movement
starting might that any only but the
undo fastening
want of the I doll[2]

My theorizing about the project was a matter of description first. I described how I wanted the public art installation to feel on a psychological and physiological level—mind and body together but also separate because that separation is a daily lived consequence of colonialism. This was spiritual. I talked in intuitions, afraid of sounding obscure and untenable. I have often felt anxiety when translating the images inside my mind into the sounds we register as language. The divorce allowed me to stumble through all this with more awareness. I stumbled through how this had to do with race and gender and age on some level. I earned my BA from a small Christian liberal arts college that was predominantly straight and white. I married and divorced young. That I could not name my desires, both in relationship to marriage and this project, terrified me. I wondered if my obsession with naming obscured what was actually taking place in my body. "Indeed, the privileged act of naming often affords those in power access to modes of communication that enable them to project an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work, actions, etc. that may not be accurate, that may obscure what is really taking place" (hooks 3). When others tried to name what was happening in my life, as a way to offer advice or care, I experienced even more obscurity. When I tried to name it, I was filled with more fear. The language wasn't there and so I often fell silent. I made it a habit to walk through Richard Serra's sculpture *Greenpoint* as a form of meditation and reverence. The sculpture consists of two brown steel curved walls that face each other, almost like parentheses with nothing inside. *A Yellow Silence* was conceived there. I wanted people sitting close to each other, silently, in an enclosed empty space. I wanted them to look at each other, to be together, without really hearing or talking to each other.

For years, I thought of silence primarily in the terms of Audre Lorde's 1977 essay "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action." Lorde writes of silences wherein "each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation" (42). I first read that essay shortly after I began to accept and to act on queer desires that I had learned from a very young age, as nearly everyone in this country does, to associate with contempt, judgment, and censure. I began to act on those desires but I still feared to speak of what I was doing, of what I had always wanted and who I was becoming. And I particularly feared speaking of these things to the people I loved. So I turned to Lorde:

> We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. (44)

Seeing the ways my own silence had always been wedded to fear, and beginning to accept the reality of that fear rather than fleeing from it, made it possible for me to participate in a community of queer writers groping toward a language for aspects of our lives that had been, for years, unspeakable. But as I read and reread Lorde's work over the course of a decade, often in the moments of crisis we seem to be constantly living through, I began to question the binary Lorde sets up, where silence is always coupled with fear and language is always coupled with action. There were moments in my life when silence felt active, transformative, even healing. And while I had begun to write through fear, I had not yet begun to heal certain wounds through which fear had entered me.

I developed persistent major depression and generalized anxiety disorder around the time I hit puberty, and I have been in and out of therapy, on and off various medications, ever since. But it didn't occur to me until I was in my thirties that these disorders might be, to some extent, expressions of gender dysphoria. I did not recognize or know how to name that pain until I had come to know and love more than one trans person. I had known for some years that trans people existed, but until I was in my mid twenties the only trans people I knew or saw represented in our culture were people who transitioned from one binary gender to another, from female to male or vice versa. Those narratives are vitally important, and I did identify with them to some extent, but I was still looking for language that might describe my lived experience without doing violence to it, or without appropriating the experiences of other gender nonconforming people. So many of the terms we use to name and describe our experiences "have been shaped by something that can't imagine you," as Katie Schmid puts it in the opening line of *A Yellow Silence*.

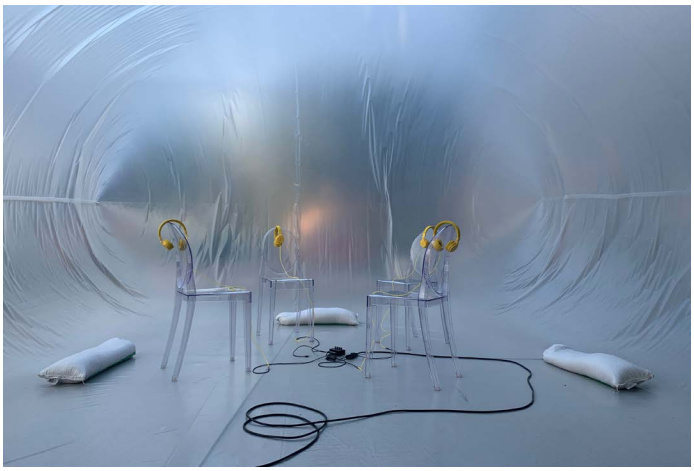
I recorded Schmid saying those words at a book club we had three years before I ever imagined this project. I remember hearing her and immediately asking if she would repeat it so I could record that sonic moment on my phone. I was in awe. I sensed the mysticism

2 This is a poem I made with words from one of my favorite paragraphs of Pizarnik's poem "Cornerstone," which can be found in her chapbook *A Musical Hell*. This chapbook is included in *Extracting the Stone of Madness* translated by Yvette Siegert.

in her language, some future need for those words. I only stumbled upon the recording again when I started using my phone to record myself talking through my ideas for *A Yellow Silence.* Schmid's voice had seeded this project long before it became a reality. Listen to "Conditions."

> Every book we've ever read by a woman has a throat or scream in it. Screaming creates a kind of silence.
>
> the blue woman shapes a premonition a yellow silence I am afraid of the grey wolf that disguises itself in the rain the word for desire possible unions what I want from this poem is the loosening of my throat the real celebrations take place in the body and in dreams when I say "I" I mean the luminous dawn I want to share a different silence laugh at yourself/laugh at myself the music is always too high or too low never at the center that place of our fusion and encounter

Cheryl Glenn theorizes silence as "a rhetorical art for resisting discipline(s)" (261). The word "discipline" means many different things, but in this context I'm talking about resisting the forces that discipline women and other marginalized people who dare to interpret, to define, to describe their experiences. Glenn works and writes in a more conventionally academic mode than Lorde, but her theory of silence is not abstract; she is just as concerned with the material impact of disciplinary forces on women, and specifically on women of color. Glenn argues for the validity of Anita Hill's decision to remain silent about the sexual harassment she endured from Clarence Thomas until she was subpoenaed, for instance, and the many ways we might understand that silence: not only as protection in a situation where neither silence nor speech are safe but also as a refusal to speak when the language isn't there, a strategic refusal that does not preclude other forms of action. Listen to "Ruidomudo."



HILARY WIESE

## WHEN I SAY "I" I MEAN THE LUMINOUS DAWN

*A Yellow Silence* enacts a particular relationship to sound, to the body. It leads us into listening. There is an architectural rhetoric at work that not only implicates the participant's body in the text but also asks the participant to forego speech in favor of listening through the simple act of putting on a pair of headphones. It was fascinating to watch people enter the inflatable structure, look around, pick up a pair of headphones—there's a moment when the participants try to orient themselves; you can see them simultaneously trying to figure out what's happening auditorily while also becoming conscious of their own bodies. *Where do I look? Do I want to make eye contact with my friend in the next chair? The stranger across from me? What is my face revealing or betraying?* For me, the particular kind of silence and the particular kind of listening that happen during that moment of rhetorical instability have transformative potential. A shift occurs in my consciousness of myself, of how I relate.

KATIE MARYA

I wanted people to listen to their bodies and the bodies of others, so turning off sound in one way and turning it on in another seemed crucial. I hadn't named this project until Luis Othoniel Rosa, one of my professors and dear friends, gave me the time and space to fully imagine it. What do I mean by "a yellow silence?" The phrase actually came from a short nonfiction piece I was working on around the same time called "What Divorce Is." Near the end I write: "We're quiet. We are the nicest kind of cruel and it's true we don't want to be cruel. My prayer has been for a yellow silence. I wonder if I've been praying for this my whole life." I wrote the words, but it felt like the phrase just showed up out of nowhere. And it somehow encapsulated what I was looking for sonically. The word *yellow* is bright, but it's also low. It screams and hums. The color stretches. It can overwhelm. The sun. Jaundice. Cumin. French's Mustard. A sunflower. Dividing lines on the road. The ochre shawl my Grandma gave me which has been in our family for decades. In honor of improvisation, I looked up the etymology of *yellow* on Google. Some web sites highlight how *yellow* has been used to represent the aura of God and also the idea of cowardice. According to Kate Smith, an international color maven, its first written usage is found in the epic poem *Beowulf*: "The unknown author used it to describe a shield carved from yew wood." And a write-up on The Wood Database web site says, "Yew wood is perhaps the hardest of all softwood species" (Meier).

I love Glenn's essay on silence. The way she uses sections and epigraphs to create a precise and unruly form. Silence can act

as a shield, so the question of protection comes back up. Who was I protecting myself from when I fell silent in my experience of divorce and in the making of this project? I was protecting myself from myself. Adrienne Rich says,

> The liar leads an existence of unutterable loneliness. The liar is afraid. But we are all afraid: without fear we become manic, hubristic, self-destructive. What is this particular fear that possesses the liar? She is afraid that her own truths are not good enough. She is afraid, not so much of prison guards or bosses, but of something unnamed within her. ("Women" 417)

Because I could not put what I was feeling into language, I feared it was not good enough. I was afraid of the unnamed, and it would take me the next two years to get close to articulating why I felt so terrible. I also feared that people, people I loved, would misread me or categorize me as wrong, as out of touch with reality, or as crazy, that ever-charged word often ascribed to women who try to liberate themselves from capitalism and white supremacy. Rich wrote those words in 1977, the same year Audre Lorde wrote,

> These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep. (36-37)

I often think about how women attempt this liberation without knowing the names of the systems from which we need liberating. I will always be trying to improvise and fashion a sonic landscape of liberation. I think *A Yellow Silence* was the real beginning of that work for me.

HILARY WIESE

One thing I find powerful in the way you define "a yellow silence" is that it creates space for the illegible. Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes write, "[Q]ueerness is most attractive—theoretically, personally, and politically—in its potential illegibility, its inability to be reductively represented, its disruptive potential. In a word, its impossibility, in another word, its excess" (181). I am deeply attracted to the queer in this sense, both affectively and theoretically. For instance, I am very drawn to what most people would understand as conflicting gender markers, like the way spaghetti straps emphasize a broad pair of muscular shoulders. So how does an illegible feeling or an illegible body come to be defined as wrong or crazy? And how does the constant questioning of whether one's feelings or one's body might be wrong or crazy—regardless of how those questions are answered—become a part of our identities? What are the mechanisms at work here, and how do we resist them through language, through silence, through action? I often think of June Jordan writing, "*I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name* / my name is my own my own my own" (italics in original).

But I have also lived my life in a body that is legibly masculine by most standards, with all the privileges masculinity confers, so I am wary of the ways those privileges might enable me to romanticize or fetishize more visibly queer and trans bodies. And I have only become more conscious of those power dynamics as my own gender presentation has gradually shifted toward the feminine. One expects this of course, to some degree, but I have been surprised by how much of it has come from within communities we call "queer." When I shaved my beard and started posting pictures on Scruff where I was wearing lipstick and more feminine clothing, there was a drastic decline in the number of messages I received, and some of the messages I did get were harassing in ways they never had been before. These gendered silences and attacks feel personal in one sense, but they are more fundamentally a response to how the feminine presentation of a male body disrupts the homonormative ways gay men tend to read bodies offered for their consumption on these apps. What they find threatening, what I found threatening for so many years, is the fear that I might be reading my own body and the bodies of others wrongly, that all our bodies might be less legible than we imagine or pretend, that the signs and symbols of our gender system might be fluid, unstable, illusory.

If I was not an easily recognizable person, a white heterosexual married woman, then who was I? If I was not commodified—the illegible packaged into a legible consumable form—who would have me? If I could not locate my identity in terms of a marriage where I belonged to someone, then where and how would I belong? My fucked definitions of love were breaking down. I was beginning to recognize love outside the constructs of commodification.

Luis's class "Feminist Literature across the Americas" exposed me to writers who were conceptualizing liberation and silence in a way that felt vital to my growth and my ability to make art—texts

by Silvia Federici, Sor Juana Inés, Julia de Burgos, Octavia Butler, Raquel Salas Rivera, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Sara Uribe, and of course Alejandra Pizarnik. And there was this idea of rhetorical listening as defined by Krista Ratcliffe: "Just as all texts can be read, so too can all texts be listened to. As a trope for interpretive invention, rhetorical listening differs from reading in that it proceeds via different body organs, different disciplinary and cultural assumptions, and different figures of speech" (203). These writers helped me shape a form for *A Yellow Silence* that felt closer to my experience. Luis suggested I consider an intertextual approach to this "sound project" I had swimming around in my head, and so I relied specifically on Anzaldúa and Uribe to envision a form; what they did in terms of hybridity on the page I did materially with sound and architecture.

In *Antígona González*, Uribe pieces together fragments—newspaper clippings, first-hand accounts, lines of poetry, and questions—to chronicle a sister's search for her missing brother, Tadeo, in Tamaulipas, México, a state with one of the highest reported cases of missing persons in the country due to narco violence and femicide. Alongside the search for Tadeo, Uribe makes the names of many other disappeared persons visible, what Judith Butler categorizes in the blurb on the back of this book as "emphatic graphic marks where there is no trace of loss." Though I understand Butler's categorization of writing, it makes me nauseous sometimes, this thing we do with language—that we write books as a form of presence where there is so much absence. Art is always a form of grief. As a reader, you begin to sense how Uribe cannot separate her own body from the bodies of the missing. She writes, "¿Qué cosa es el cuerpo cuando está perdido? / What thing is the body when it's lost?" (111). And later, "Somos lo que deshabita desde la memoria. / We are what vacates from the space of memory" (121).

> Ghosts
>
> This voice of our voices is fragile.
> Our mouths a wooden boat on the lake of history.
> We mean to say the sounds of our mouths are a boat
> in our exile. There is no country for us except the body.

I would realize, through my divorce, that I had not dealt with or even faced my experience of childhood sexual trauma and how this intersected with the exploitation of women and violent drug addiction in my family. This is not to equate my experience with the violence to which Uribe bears witness, but it is to say a decolonial awareness of our historical context connected my constitutive trauma with something that far surpasses our individual I's. Uribe says, "Lo que sucede son los derrumbes / What is happening are collapses" (86). Something was collapsing in me, and I was trying to fragment any sort of healing together through art. I could relate to the various ways Uribe makes PTSD symptoms felt. On the final page she asks, "¿Me ayudarás a levantar el cadáver? / Will you join me in taking up the body?" (171). *A Yellow Silence* was one way to participate in this "taking up," an attempt to demonstrate the confessional language of the self not as the goal or destination of the poetic journey but a potential bridge to collective struggle.

That I was reading in multiple imperial languages is important. I chose to keep the final version of *A Yellow Silence* mostly in English because it is my first language, but what's true is that the lexicon on which I normally relied to make things was breaking down. It always has been. I could not separate my specific pain from my understanding of colonization and its obsession with turning men into conquerors of body and land, its obsession with a kind of "taking" that causes the very absences to which Uribe's "taking up" responds. Perhaps I was drawn to sound rather than written work because I was trying to listen to these texts in the way Ratcliffe describes. It's interesting to note Uribe's work is often performed. It is often audible. My decisions, both in this project and in my personal life, were made on an unending impulse, a need to get my body alone and to recover on my own terms, to surround myself with the voices and memories of women who knew more than I did about this recovery.

My body became the site of the work, but I wasn't interested in putting forth my body in a material way. And expressing myself in written form only, meaning only on the page, didn't feel quite right either. I imagine this is why Pizarnik became central to the project. Her poetry is about language's failure to represent the body, and an architecture, some impulse to construct a space, looms large. You're inside her mind cave. The search for a room. For belonging. The self as prison and liberation. That dissident border that exists between the interior and exterior, between past and present. The essential paradox of Pizarnik's poetry is, as Fiona J. Mackintosh notes, "shoring oneself up in language as a defense against language itself" (115). Poet Valzhyna Mort, in her remarkably strange essay on Pizarnik's repeated use of dolls, imagines that the source of this obsession may be Pizarnik's awareness that had her parents not immigrated from Poland to Argentina when they did in 1934, "[she] would have been murdered in the Rovno ghetto at the age of five." Later Mort writes, "Pizarnik's memory is a memory of a would-have-been life. Its pull, however, seems stronger than her real life: the dead girl dominates her poems while the real Pizarnik seems to be only the shadow cast by that imagined death." I understand this. Had my mother not left Atlanta when I was eight, not moved us away from multiple dangers, I am not sure what would have happened to me. What threatened me was obviously not the same oppression that threatened Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland, but it was a life potentially filled with sexual abuse and the violence of addiction. I imagine this "would-have-been" girl often. Her body. What I endured and what I was spared from enduring. How leaving separated me from parts of my family I now constantly long for. Perhaps, in *A Yellow Silence*, I was working out the domination and pull of that girl. It was hard to decide which Pizarnik excerpt to use here, but this one feels especially poignant. It's from a section of *A Musical Hell* called "La palabra que sana / The Shape of Absence" (*Extracting* 116-17).

> La palabra que sana
>
> Esperando que un mundo sea desenterrado por el lenguaje, alguien canta el lugar en que se forma el silencio. Luego comprobará que no porque se muestre furioso existe el mar, ni tampoco el mundo. Por eso cada palabra dice lo que dice y además más y otra cosa.
>
> The Word That Heals
>
> While waiting for the world to be unearthed by language, someone is singing about the place where silence is formed. Later it'll be shown that just because it displays its fury doesn't mean the sea—or the world—exists. In the same way, each word says what it says—and beyond that, something more and something else.

## TRAPPED INSIDE A WHITE ROOM

It was exciting and scary when *A Yellow Silence* got accepted to the show *Lincoln PoPs: Global Frequencies* and they gave us a budget. A sound installation where I could manipulate the words of poems I loved, poems I had not written, and intermingle them with words I had, where I could treat poetry more like a collage of voices, was an intoxicating prospect. It felt like I was positioning myself, the artist, as a listener first. Carrying this out was an attempt to show that position, to make an art piece where the content was the embodied listening itself. I had to physically move much more than I would writing a poem at my desk—trips to Home Depot, ironing plastic, loading and unloading materials. I felt more conscious of my agency, my intuitive impulses as an artist, because of this. The choice to focus on the audibility of poems was not about detaching them from a body—a voice is not just sound even if you only hear it, even if you don't see the body from which the voice comes. Sound on an anatomical level is touch. It is vibration. I wanted to heighten people's awareness of being inside their own heads and next to one another at the same time. I wanted to create a different kind of touching, one that was both haunting and revelatory.

> Listen to "Echo."

At one point the participants hear an egg frying, which also mimics the sounds of crackling fire, as an allusion to the witch hunts that took place in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—the same time Spain began colonizing the Americas. I relied on Federici's theoretical work about how these witch hunts are directly related to the rise of global capitalism, and I quote Sor Juana Inés in the recording because she's working from the colonized lands of the Nahuas in the heart of the former Aztec empire, now México, as the witch hunts are starting. Sor Juana Inés is foundational in terms of silence as a rhetorical strategy. A group of priests afraid of her intelligence threatened to take away her books because of their supposed effect on her psychological state. She responds by stating that even if her books are taken away, she will still have cooking:

> What can I tell you, about nature's secrets as I've discovered them while cooking? I see that an egg becomes solid and fries in oil, while, on the other hand, it dissolves in syrup. I see that in order to keep sugar in a liquid state it suffices to add a small part of water mixed with sour fruit. I see that an egg's yolk and white have opposite characteristics. I don't want to bore you. I mention these cold facts to give you a full account of my natures. What can we women possibly know other than kitchen philosophies? If Aristotle had cooked stews, he would have written a lot more. I have no need for books.

Sor Juana Inés does not confess to going insane like the priests want her to; she stays silent on that matter. Instead, she takes back her power by speaking directly to the thing they fear: not books, but her desire to learn and write what she wants. She locates rhetorical agency within the confines of the monastery, the only intellectual space open to her as an unmarried woman. She does this even as the fathers of the church actively try to discipline her, to extract a confession from her, to contain her influence. Sor Juana was able to resist the power of the church fathers, to some degree, because her excess of intelligence, her excess of language, found expression within discourses sanctioned by the church. I am interested in these excesses and in what *A Yellow Silence* does with excess in a temporal or historical sense. Federici presents us with the burned bodies of witches in far larger numbers than dominant historical narratives account for. Pizarnik's poems seem to exceed the boundaries of the genre, defying conventions of lineation and rationality. She follows the lead of the surrealists to some extent while also moving beyond their antirationality. *A Yellow Silence* takes these excessive texts, embodies them in living voices, lays them alongside one another, and asks us to listen to them. This is one of the ways the project prompts us to do what I referred to earlier as a "particular kind of listening." I think this is what Krista Ratcliffe is talking about when she writes,

> [W]e choose to listen also for the exiled excess and contemplate its relation to our culture and ourselves. Such listening does not presume a naive, relativistic empathy, such as "I'm OK, You're OK," but rather an ethical responsibility to argue for what we deem fair and just while simultaneously questioning that which we deem fair and just. Such listening, I argue, may help us invent, interpret, and ultimately judge differently in that perhaps we can *hear* things we cannot *see*. (203)

Ratcliffe's insistence on a nuanced and critical ethical discourse resonates with me deeply, and I think that's the reason this quotation sticks in my mind. But as I have been reading and rereading

this article in the context of our conversation, I'm more struck by the last sentence, and how *A Yellow Silence* brings forth a voice of Sor Juana, a woman who was not silenced so much as she was rendered invisible—do we hear what we cannot see? Her body literally contained within the walls of a monastery, caring for the sick and dying, even as her writing emanates outward. Do we hear and see other kinds of labor crucial to human existence that are so often carried out in containment?

I have been obsessed for years with Octavia Butler's novel *Dawn*, which we read in Luis's class. The protagonist, Lilith, awakens naked, trapped inside a white room without any defined corners where light seems to shine from the ceiling itself rather than from any fixture. She is unambiguously a prisoner, but later in the novel, Lilith gains the power to create openings in these walls and sometimes seals herself and others behind them, exercising a kind of agency over her own containment and the containment of other humans. I didn't think about how much the literal architecture of *A Yellow Silence* had in common with those organic containment rooms until now, but the resemblance is striking. Though the inflatable structure of *A Yellow Silence* is inorganic—it's made of semitransparent sheets of plastic—it often feels alive to me because of the way light plays across its rounded surfaces, how tree branches rustle against it casting leaf-shaped shadows, the way it seems to take on a nocturnal personality as twilight settles over it.

HILARY WIESE

How *is* containment a feminist idea? It seems to me now that I'd been trying very hard *not* to think about certain psychological and social structures that had been containing me for decades. One way my anxiety manifests is through patterns of avoidance, particularly avoidance of difficult emotions. Right now, as I'm writing this paragraph, my mind skitters and wanders and stops, looking for a way out of the text. I do not want to write my body into the text, to write what I was struggling with at the beginning of this project. I want to retreat into some kind of silence. But even as I write this sentence I think of how Adrienne Rich warned us not to misunderstand our own silence: "It is a presence / it has a history a form // Do not confuse it / with any kind of absence" (*The Dream of a Common Language* 17).

Getting divorced means engaging with all kinds of avoidance and silence. Like I mentioned earlier, I struggled to explain why I wanted a divorce. Silence filled up my new apartment, my solitary bedroom; it filled the space between me and the mirror, between lighting candles and organizing bookshelves, between closing the front door and opening it the next morning. I resonate with the word *containment* when I remember that apartment. Sometimes it felt good to be there alone. Sometimes it felt like a trap I'd constructed for myself. I am thinking of how Pizarnik at twenty-three years old left Argentina to go to Paris, that European epicenter she saw as the ultimate place for creative expression and writing: "I would like to live in order to write. . . . Tengo que ir a Francia"—the privilege of her self-imposed literary exile (Ferrari). I relied so much on the poems she wrote in French there, which are translated and collected in *The Galloping Hours*. This goes back to how reading across and through multiple languages felt essential—the various sonic landscapes, the endless translating. Silence shows different sides of itself through the process of translation. The noises that became most familiar to me in that solitary apartment were cooking noises: frying an egg, the sound of water running into the sink, squeezing the last bit of soap out of the bottle. I learned to really feel there in my fluctuating perception of that space. I learned how I wanted to be a writer; I didn't want isolation, I wanted longevity. All of this made its way into the audio portion of the project in some form.

DAVID MANZANARES

## THE LOOSENING OF MY THROAT

I had reached a point in my life where looking at myself in the mirror with any degree of attention made me feel disgust and nausea, for reasons that still resist what language I have for talking about

gender. Over the past year I have gradually begun to identify more openly as genderqueer, but what does that really mean except that I no longer consider the word *man* to be an accurate or adequate description of who I am? I'm not sure the word *genderqueer* communicates an identity in any defined or stable sense so much as it poses a question, or a series of questions. And isn't that part of what it means to queer language? To shift from speaking in terms of binary or essential categories to a more fluid mode of inquiry? As human beings moving through the world, and especially as writers, I think we are still looking for language that communicates the specificities of gendered experience. My body hair—which grows thickly all over me—has always felt alien, like something aside from myself but which I can't get away from. Maybe that's one of the reasons I see such possibility in the way Octavia Butler writes about aliens covered in sensory tentacles, which she describes as resembling writhing hair or tiny living snakes. These aliens have three sexes, and while some critics have read Butler's novels as biologically essentialist, my own reading aligns much more closely with Dagmar Van Engen's reading of Butler as a transfuturist envisioning a species for whom a nonbinary conception of gender is the norm. What would it mean to be contained by such beings, to be contained *outside* a Western gender binary rather than within it? For most people who have lived their lives within the confines of this gender system, to pass through its walls might seem unimaginable. But part of what makes Butler's writing so important to me is how she helps us envision possibilities beyond the binary that are terrifying—particularly in the ways they parallel colonialism—but that are also deeply seductive and potentially liberatory.

This resonates with Alexander and Rhodes's advocacy for the illegible, Glenn's thinking about silence as a form of resistance, and Ratcliffe's attention to excess. This notion of the queer I've been exploring throughout this essay, and through which I am reading Butler, suggests radical interventions, interventions that go further than demanding inclusion and representation, as vital as those demands are. It shifts our focus from thinking and writing in terms of those identities and experiences we already know how to name toward the margins where listening becomes the central modality as opposed to knowing or speaking. Lilith's struggle in the novel *Dawn* is to locate possible agencies within her seemingly absolute imprisonment, and that is one way we can understand a lot of queer and feminist struggle. How do we learn to open and close the walls within which we live?


KATIE MARYA

I mean art, really poetry, is my most focused intervention. Or at least the one that continues to make the most sense to me. I try to examine the walls from the positions I inhabit. I am so drawn to the scenes where Lilith is in that room, pressing and running her hands against and along those walls. Nobody talks about how strange time becomes during a separation. Lilith didn't know two hundred years had passed and the Oankali just put people to sleep for wild amounts of time. I was separated for a year and a half before the divorce was final. Sometimes it feels like a whole decade passed. At other moments, it could have just been a single night's sleep. I want to say I often felt sure of myself during that in-between time, but that's not true. And even after I had practiced my long-desired version of self-trust, even after I had felt my way through certain walls, I still questioned my decision. I had never felt agency like I did when I chose to leave my marriage. It terrified me. Would I survive? Have enough money? Practical terrors. But leaving also registered in my body another terror: my belief that we are each capable of enacting violence. I experienced a kind of liberation, but I also deeply hurt one of my life's greatest companions. Is that a violence? I am still not sure, but I experienced it as one. That terror taught me how to recognize my own agency in small moments of creation. I don't want that to be true, but it is. I started to feel the whole way through instead of finally feeling.

Listen to "Monster Girl."

When I was a teenager, I experimented with shaving different parts of my body. At one point I shaved all the hair off my body, including my scalp and my eyebrows. There were moments when my closest friends literally did not recognize me. But I liked the way I looked and felt without hair, like I was new, like some inner, more vulnerable skin had been revealed. This did not make it possible for me to love my body—I've always felt distant from the rhetoric of loving one's body—but it allowed me to recognize myself in a way I hadn't been able to for years. I had no idea how to explain what I was thinking or feeling to my family or friends, but I did begin writing poems around that time, looking for a language that might make it possible to articulate my experience, my sense of self.

The first poem I ever read in public was, it seems to me now, about my struggle to identify with any sense of masculinity. I didn't have that language as a teenager, of course, but the central motifs of the poem were a yearning for "leather-men" and a fear of my cock crumbling to dust. As a kid raised in a very normative white suburb and a very normative nuclear family, it felt like a terrifying and radical act to stand in front of an audience and confess such things. My hands shook so hard I couldn't even read parts of the poem as I'd written it. I improvised from the fragments I remembered. Afterward, someone told me they liked the way I "used silence," which seemed very strange to me. For a long time, I couldn't figure out what that meant, and I wondered if it was a polite way to discourage me from reading in public. I had never been taught to value silence in that way, or to understand how it functions. But eventually I came to understand that manipulating silence—by which I mean both verbal and textual silence—is as central to

poetry or to any form of communication as the words we speak or the marks we make on the page.

## THAT PLACE OF OUR FUSION AND ENCOUNTER

The nature of *A Yellow Silence* was always collaborative in its intertextuality but working with Holly and Hilary was my first experience with collaboration in real time. It was awkward. I had to express my ideas clearly and again I couldn't. What I had imagined morphed into something fuller and more compelling when I loosened my grip. Hilary and Holly changed the project for the better. Their ideas and expertise allowed me to focus fully on the sonic element, to manipulate the sounds and silence into a poetic experience, while they created a structure in which this experience would happen. We were literally creating the form and content alongside each other in my living room and driveway, but language was not the center of how we communicated, or rather, it was, but not in that we said things correctly and then understood each other. Words failed and so the structure was created based on what it was not; it became the thing we could not figure out how to say, exactly—so to share the thing we made from lack felt like a terrifying and radical act, too.

HILARY WIESE

While I was getting divorced, I kept waiting for someone to tell me I was insane. Women are continually asked to explain their trauma, to account for it, to prove it. While making *A Yellow Silence*, I questioned the idea that to reveal one's trauma via language clarifies or absolves anything. This goes back to the idea of confession. I wanted to work against the constant interrogation and mistrust of my own impulses. Working alongside Holly and Hilary allowed me silence and quiet and taught me not to rush toward explanation. The more I did this, the more I came to recognize surety, mainly in the small decisions rather than the big ones. The less I relied on language to prove to me my own sanity or to justify the moves I wanted to make in the audio portion of the project, the saner I felt. I use the word *sane* here because working on this project and getting a divorce were about my sanity—a kind of confrontation of mental illness that had grown out of that childhood sexual trauma and of the limits from which I had operated for so long. Collaborating was, in a sense, an outlet for me to affirm my ability to create something I did not fully understand. To move my quiet, inner artistic ideas into the public on my own terms with the help of artists I trusted. This began to mirror my personal life and I felt better.

On the day of the public premier of *A Yellow Silence* I decided, rather impulsively, to wear a burgundy turtleneck maxi dress that I'd bought recently. It wasn't the first time I'd worn a dress in public, but it was the first time in a few years, the first time since I'd met you. It was something I'd been wanting to do for some time, and something we'd talked about. I worried that you or others might think I was trying to make the event *about me* in some vain way, but I didn't really want to be looked at or talked about. I just wanted to be a person wearing a piece of clothing that I felt good in, that I could see a part of myself in, a part of myself that tends to be contained or rendered illegible. This project queers public space in a way that made it seem possible for me to have that experience without explaining or even discussing it. I felt nervous walking over—the walk from my apartment to the project site is less than a mile, but it was a football game day, and the streets were crowded with Husker fans. Once I saw you and you teared up and hugged me, I knew you understood perfectly.

I remember seeing you walk up from a distance. I tried not to cry. I wanted to communicate both excitement and awe without drawing some kind of loud attention to your being. Listen to "Knife."

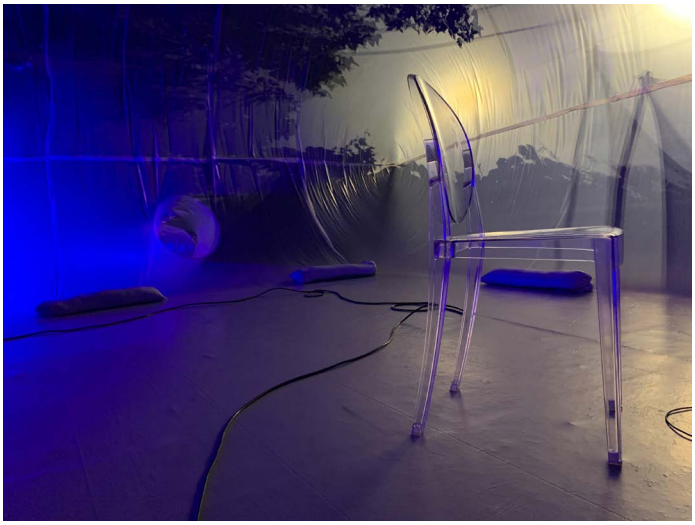
Though we'd been talking about the project for months, when I finally saw the 30-by-60-foot inflatable structure on the Centennial Mall, which passersby were invited to enter through a vertical slit that was unzipped and then closed behind each person, I found it impossible to think of it as anything other than a womb. Maybe this association was reinforced by the fact that the Centennial Mall literally lies in the shadow of the Nebraska State Capitol building, a 400-foot tall monument to the power of the state, topped by a gilded dome and a 20-foot-tall statue of an indigenous farmer literally sowing his seed across the plains. But once I took a seat in one of the four transparent plastic chairs inside the structure, and put on the headphones hanging there, my perception shifted. There was Schmid's voice repeating for nearly two and a half minutes, "The material conditions of your reality and the conditions of your mind have been shaped by something that can't imagine you." As her voice was transformed with each repetition by various forms of digital distortion, I began to feel almost oppressively contained within the space. And perhaps to leap from the metaphorical association of a womb to a prison is not such a long leap in a society where women have been jailed as punishment for having miscarriages and abortions.


KATIE MARYA

I was aware of my own body in an old and familiar way that day. I was sweaty, dusty—wearing dirty athletic pants and a grimy t-shirt. I did not feel pretty. I have a strange relationship with that word—I was taught that to feel pretty means to feel more confident. What a strange lie. I had a hard time being present after we installed the project and solved all the technical issues. I wanted to go home and shower and put makeup on. I wanted to look "effortless," but I could not leave because it was windy. The structure, though weighted down with sandbags, moves with the wind. It is always shifting and adjusting. My head went back to my uncomfortable adolescent body, bleached blonde highlights and clothes to make boys like me, all the years of grooming women receive—our specific objectification. That young girl was fifteen years gone, but still I was just learning how to appreciate all the parts of my body without trying to morph them into some magazine brand of white woman. I tried to breathe. I told myself that I belonged, that my body had labored to create something and it deserved love as it was, right there. I did a head-to-toe scan, an anxiety grounding technique. The self-hating dialogue in my head didn't go away, I wanted to escape, I didn't want to take any pictures. I oscillated in and out of interactions with the participants and my friends. It did not get easier to like my body that day, but there I was.

It shouldn't surprise me when you write of wanting to escape your body because we talk about such feelings all the time, but it does. You are a relentlessly *present* person, a person very aware of your own body and those around you. But I also know hypervigilance can be a response to trauma. We are both still unlearning the hatreds we've internalized.

At several points while working on this dialogue with you—we are literally sitting and writing together in a coffee shop right now—I have had the sense of a panic attack coming on. This is not terribly unusual for me as a person with generalized anxiety disorder, but it is a specific response to writing about my body, to thinking and talking about my body hair, for example. While we've been writing this essay we've been having a parallel conversation about waxing. The idea of approaching a stranger in Nebraska and asking them to touch my back hair in any way repulses me; I begin to dissociate from my body almost immediately. Yet there's a line in *A Yellow Silence* I don't think we've ever talked about where you say, "Everyone's back is perfect and should be touched." That thought seems foreign to my understanding of my own body; it seems impossible, but every time I read or hear it, my body responds. My throat loosens, to use another phrase from *A Yellow Silence*. My heart swells. I tend to distrust writing about the heart as anything but a muscle, but there it is.


LUIS OTHONIEL ROSA

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**Acknowlegements**

*We would like to acknowledge and thank each person who worked on* A Yellow Silence *with us. Our points of connection mean much more than language could ever convey: Holly Craig, architect; Hilary Wiese, architect; Katie Schmid, writer and vocalist of opening sequence; César A. García, sound engineer; Luis Othoniel Rosa, vocalist; Laura García, vocalist; Dan Winter, vocalist; Alexander Ramirez, videographer; WAI Think Tank, consultant architects. The vocalists listed here have all granted verbal consent to the use of the above recordings for this publication.*

# Archives and the Labor of Building Feminist Theory: An Interview with Sharon Davenport

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**Abstract**
This article traces the labor of archiving the papers of the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA), a women-of-color organization that grew out of the Civil Rights/Black Power movements and maintained active chapters in NYC and the Bay Area during the 1970s. Drawing on an interview with Sharon Davenport, who processed the TWWA's archives, this article situates archiving as indispensable, feminized, and often-invisible labor that builds the context for feminist writing, theorizing, and teaching in institutions of higher education.

**Keywords**
archives, cultural work, feminist theory

## INTRODUCTION

This article traces the labor of archiving the papers of the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA), a women-of-color organization that grew out of the Civil Rights/Black Power movements and maintained active chapters in New York City and the Bay Area during the 1970s. I chose to research the TWWA and interview Sharon Davenport to get a sense of the labor of organizers, writers, and archivists that underlies the body of theory now known as US Third World/Intersectional Feminisms. The TWWA, along with countless other political organizations, built these theories through a range of compositions: political education documents, training materials, the newspaper *Triple Jeopardy: Racism, Imperialism Sexism*, and cultural work (encompassing songs, scripts, speeches, visual displays, food, childcare).

These compositions, along with the TWWA archives in their entirety, are now housed in the Sophia Smith Collection (SSC) at Smith College. Institutions of higher education in the United States have been both integral sites of Third World Liberation Movement-era activism (Hoang; Kynard) and leaders in empire building on political, economic, and cultural fronts (Chatterjee and Maira; Giroux). In that sense, these institutions mirror the US nation-state, which is both a global empire and the location of insurgent political organizing and activism. As Piya Chaterjee and Sunaina Maira write in their introduction to *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, Dwight D. Eisenhower's famous "military-industrial-complex" speech originally referenced the "academic-military-industrial complex," pointing to the active role institutions of higher education have taken in weapons development and CIA/State Department ties—in other words, the forces the TWWA worked to counter. At the same time, the TWWA papers are some of the archive's most-used holdings and are used by educators and researchers across disciplines to unearth and reconstruct US Third World feminist-movement histories and put them into conversation with contemporary struggles.

None of this work would be possible without the labor of archiving the TWWA papers. Furthermore, through engaging with the process of archiving, we gain a deeper sense of why and how the archives came to be placed at Smith College. By focusing

on the labor of archiving, I take my lead from the methodologies of social-movement scholars in rhetoric and writing who orient to the behind-the-scenes labor of organizing and the everyday textual labor of building movements and preserving movement histories (Leon; Monberg). My embodied experiences as a cross-disciplinary teacher/scholar of rhetoric and composition and women's and gender studies, and an organizer who prioritizes behind-the-scenes, gendered labor such as internal document preparation and childcare, orient me to the labor that scaffolds more public-facing work like publishing theory and public speaking. Drawing on an interview I conducted with Sharon Davenport, who processed the TWWA's archives, this article situates archiving as indispensable, feminized, and often-invisible labor that builds the context for feminist writing, theorizing, and teaching in institutions of higher education.

I was prompted to interview Davenport after chatting with a librarian at the Sophia Smith Collection and learning about Davenport's work on the archives. It struck me that despite years of doing archival research, I had never questioned *who* processed the archives I was working with or *how* they came to be housed in university libraries. Davenport's interview prompts us to ask important questions about the relationships among our identities, feminist histories, and the politics of archiving—questions central to the contexts in which we work and write.

## THE TWWA PAPERS

As we consider the politics of archiving the papers of revolutionary movements, we see Davenport's orientation towards the archives is grounded in her longstanding work as a political activist and librarian. The labor of archiving movements begins years before an archivist's hands touch the materials for the first time; the orientation is built through years of work, organizing, and political study—in Davenport's case, as a political activist, archivist, and librarian. After attending Woodbury College and gaining some experience in archival work, she attended Smith College when she was in her 60s on a tuition scholarship and worked at the Sophia Smith Collection (SSC) for the three years she attended Smith. She was also a founding member of the Brick Hut Cafe, a worker-owned LGBT community fixture in the Bay Area (Davenport, "LGBT Pride"), and is a member of the Bay Area Lesbian Archives.

While she had grown up in the Bay area and attended the TWWA's International Women's Day cultural events there, she was not familiar with the group's other work because of the lack of published material on it. In 2004, she received a Praxis Grant from Smith to travel to Oakland, California, where she connected with Linda Burnham, one of the TWWA's founding members who was then executive director of the Women of Color Resource Center.[1] Burnham asked Davenport to process the TWWA papers for the duration of her grant. Working in collaboration with Burnham, in conversation with her faculty mentor at Smith, and doing quite a bit of independent research,[2] Davenport finished her 220 hours and stayed on even longer to finish processing "boxes and boxes and boxes and boxes of disorganized papers, pamphlets, posters, all kinds of stuff."

Processing the papers filled in the historical gaps for Davenport. She had been deeply influenced by Frances Beal's "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" (Davenport, "Francis Beal's"), along with the writings of Angela Davis, Sara Evans, Kimberly Springer, and *The Black Woman* collection writers. Processing the archives allowed her to see the theories of these writers in concrete, everyday practice through grassroots organizing, political education, newspaper publication, cultural work, and coalitional work with other radical Third World organizations. Davenport describes the archiving process as "mind altering," "revelatory," "life-changing work" that gave her a glimpse into the TWWA's "centrality to the development of the women's-liberation movement." This prompted her to question the dominant periodization of the feminist movement in the United States and the invisibility of revolutionary women-of-color organizing work:

> This project began with stacks of disorganized storage boxes overflowing with a variety of documents and photographs spanning over ten years of organizational activism. I processed these papers from material chaos—identifying conservation and preservation issues as I organized—to finding aid [an inventory of archival materials]. In the process of organizing these documents, I was able to map the social and organizational history of the Third World Women's Alliance from group statements, publications, meeting notes, correspondence, and ephemera of the TWWA's members. These important records of a foundational African American, Asian American, and Puerto Rican activist, womanist organization are now safely housed and research-ready collections. My experience of organizing the TWWA's documentation of a revolutionary, women-of-color, mass organization led me to reinvestigate the historiography of black feminist movements in the US.

Davenport described being "blown away" by every piece of paper she encountered and expressed profound respect for the depth with which the organization engaged its theoretical and political questions:

> They went deep. They weren't going for broad; they were going deep. They were questioning, they were self-criticizing,

1 The TWWA became the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, and then the Women of Color Resource Center, which operated until 2011 ("Sharing Sorrow").

2 Not much had been published on the TWWA at this point, but Kimberly Springer's book *Living for the Revolution* proved useful to Davenport.

> they were putting out white papers . . . their papers that expressed the belief that ordinary women could become leaders. Wow! What a concept. They believed in collective support of women of color to make change.

As she made her way through the papers, Davenport gained insight into the TWWA's intervention in the white, middle-class women's movements of the 1970s:

> Basically, and I don't mean this derogatorily, the white women's liberation movement was basically middle-class women . . . very few working-class women were involved in the initial organizing. But really, the TWWA and other Black feminisms really pushed them hard, challenged them hard, to get a line on anti-imperialism and antiracism, and anti-institutional racism in the United States. So, it was a revelation to me, what these women were doing.

In addition to archiving and categorizing these boxes of materials, Davenport created a finding aid to make the categorized papers easily accessible. Reflecting on her time processing the archives, Davenport expressed deep appreciation to Linda Burnham for the opportunity and support in this work. Reflecting on Davenport's work, Linda Burnham expressed a deep appreciation as well, explaining how Davenport's work offered an opportunity for former TWWA members to collect their materials and think through how they wanted these materials to be used:

> Sharon has worked incredibly hard to bring organization to the chaos of the Third World Women's Alliance papers and materials. We had boxes of stuff from multiple individuals in no particular order . . . the fact that she was here doing the work provided the extra incentive for TWWA member[s] who had not turned over their papers to do so. Sharon's work has made it possible for us both to know what we have and to know what's missing that we might want to seek out. Further, she has created the basis for former TWWA members to take up the conversation about where we want to store our papers so that researchers will have access to them.

In other words, the process of archiving can support practices of reflection and assessment of social movements. Davenport wanted to make sure the archives were placed in a repository where they would be made available for use. Because of her familiarity with the SSC from her experience as a student at Smith, and her familiarity with several other archives that had large backlogs of unprocessed material, Davenport advocated that the TWWA archives be placed at the SSC. This desire to make archival materials accessible to the public brings up a contradiction Davenport points out: grassroots community archives do not always have the resources to process archival materials quickly and might have large backlogs.

During this time, the SSC, in collaboration with activist and professor Loretta Ross, was actively trying to reflect more histories of women-of-color political activism. The Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, along with archives like the TWWA's, played a central role in pushing the archives in this direction. To transform the archive, a team of archivists collected over fifty oral histories through the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, which "documents the persistence and diversity of organizing for women in the United States in the latter half of the 20th century" ("Introduction"). Ultimately, SSC received the TWWA papers because Davenport knew they had the resources to make them available for public use[3] and treat them "with respect." Upon receiving the papers, archivists at SSC rewrote the finding aid and introduction; because Davenport had processed the archives to Smith's specifications, the "very tedious but honorable work" of processing the archives was not changed. Thus, the archives were made available for use very quickly. Davenport was particularly happy that, at SSC, the archives would be used "by mostly young women whose education in [the TWWA's] iterations of feminism, Black feminism, must be eye-opening to them."

*Triple Jeopardy* has become the most popular element of the TWWA papers. Accessioning archivist Kathleen Nutter has used *Triple Jeopardy* as a resource to help researchers studying the different groups that worked with the TWWA, including the Black Panther Party. The newspaper has served her well as a summary of other movements and alliances of the era. For example, in an interview with me, she recalled a phone call from a California-based graduate student writing a dissertation on Black-Palestinian solidarities who asked whether *Triple Jeopardy* had covered these relationships. Nutter flipped through the archived issues of the newspaper, and "lo and behold, I found 8 to 9 articles, full-page spreads, on what was happening in Palestine, how to support the PLF and the Black community . . . you can find anything in *Triple Jeopardy*! It's a fabulous resource that gets used in so many classes." The TWWA's newspaper thus serves as an important historical record of Third World Liberation movement-era collaborations and solidarities. As Nutter put it, "Of the TWWA archives, [*Triple Jeopardy*] is the go-to because it's so visual. It really draws people in." People travel from all over the world, and drive hundreds of miles, to work with *Triple Jeopardy.*

## ARCHIVAL CONTEXTS FOR THEORY MAKING AND PEDAGOGY MAKING

The work detailed above forms at least part of the context from which we should understand any meaning writers/organizers/students/scholars make from the Alliance's archives. Asking critical questions about the labor underlying feminist theory making requires thinking about both the context of Smith College and the academy as a context in which terms like

3 The SSC does not require affiliation with an educational institution in order to access the archives.

*intersectionality*—instantiated in organizing by groups like the Alliance—come to structure scholarship and teaching. While Smith is an expensive elite school with a predominantly white student body[4] (contrary to the TWWA's multiracial, anticapitalist ethos), the multivalent uses of the TWWA archives demonstrate that just as the east/west and first/third world lines are blurry and co-constitutive, campus/community and academic/organizing binaries are as well.

Part of navigating this liminal space is deconstructing how words like *intersectionality* come to be taken up and often abstracted from their roots in organizing work like the TWWA's. This is the precise reason many professors teach with the TWWA archives: to reground intersectionality in the everyday organizing labor of women of color responding to urgent exigencies like forced sterilizations[5] and workplace exploitation. In her oral history, TWWA organizer Linda Burnham situates the group as intersectional in its analysis, regardless of whether it used the term:

> [S]ome of this [analysis is what] later came to be called intersectionality, which is a very complicated term, but the ideas behind that were formed in these early years, where people were essentially saying: We're whole people, and we can't combat women's issues as though we're unaffected by issues of race, as though we're unaffected by the issues that face our broader communities. So the Third World Women's Alliance was an early—it's not the only—but was an early articulation of this. (20)

Davenport also pointed to the TWWA's grounding in the lived experience of intersecting oppressions and highlighted how the TWWA pushed for a more intersectional understanding of women's liberation:

> Intersectionality and intersections get tossed around quite a bit, but we owe this idea, this concept, we owe it absolutely to Black women feminists. There is no doubt in my mind that that concept comes out of their triple oppressions. I think Shirley Chisholm said, "When I walk out the door in the morning, I know that I'm black, and a woman, and living in an imperialist society." . . . The TWWA and other Black feminisms really pushed [the women's liberation movement] hard, challenged them hard, to get a line on anti-imperialism and antiracism and anti-institutional racism in the United States.

Davenport emphasized the class analysis and Marxist-Leninist theoretical influence of the TWWA as well, with appreciation for how the group developed leadership out of the lived experience of oppression rather than relying on educational/other professional qualifications for leadership.

Such a theory of leadership is directly tied to methods for organizing spaces, which are visible in the group's archived documents. For Davenport, these documents offer crucial insights for organizing today, particularly in terms of engaging political questions deeply through sustained debate and discussion that centers the voices of working-class women of color. For her, the TWWA is "a model" for grassroots organizing, in part because of how the group developed analyses and actions out of the lived experiences of its membership. Davenport pointed to the group's policy of engaging in criticism/self-criticism and carefully documenting its limitations and self-critiques,[6] which has influenced the way she engages in organizing work today:

> I belong to an organization right now called the Bay Area Lesbian Archives. . . . My influence from the TWWA informs how I respond within this group of people about racism, anti-imperialism, and all of these things. . . . And so, we talk in depth; we do criticism/self-criticism; [it's a] very important thing, to criticize yourself and others, admit when you're wrong, and talk about it. . . . I think that the depth with which the TWWA looked at itself constantly—*what could we have done better?*—is so important to groups now trying to establish themselves as anti-imperialist, antiracist.

In relation to this type of internal organizational work, Davenport and I were both drawn to the intentionality of the TWWA's political education work. For example, TWWA members did not assume prior understanding of or consensus on the definition of terms like *imperialism* but worked to build definitions together. Davenport summarized these lessons by emphasizing the need for slow, patient political education and discussion that engages all group members and is attentive to raced/gendered dynamics:

> Take that time. Go deep. Everything's important. Every *one* is important. Everyone should have a voice. That caution to allow working class women and women of color to speak first and to give them room to talk is monumental, I think. I really do.
>
> And now, when I'm in groups, and I see white women with good intentions—because maybe they do know something important, and maybe they do have the education or the privilege, really, of knowing some things that are important to the discussion—should allow working-class women

4 According to Collegedata.com, Smith College is 52.9% white ("College Profile").

5 Recent reports of ICE's forced sterilizations make these materials excellent pedagogical materials—along with texts like the film *La Operación*—for teaching students about structural racism in reproductive health care.

6 When the WCRC closed, a thirty-plus-page critical reflection titled "Sharing Sorrow: Women of Color Resource Center's Downfall" was produced and published; Davenport links this to the TWWA's practice of criticism/self-criticism.

> and women of color to speak, and to have their piece said because they often feel, I think, although less and less I hope . . . feel like they have nothing to say because they feel *maybe I don't have the education*, or *maybe I don't have the experience*. But they have their own experience and they are educated. Everyone in our culture is educated to the ways in which power corrupts and power holds the reins of so many of the goodies—ha!—the necessities of life. Food clothing shelter. And that they keep that close to them, they hoard it.
>
> Who am I speaking of? Well there's a phrase now, the 1%—but *power.* Power. Political power. And financial power to control the lives of people. If you're just struggling every day to survive, that's a revolutionary act at this point, and always has been. And that's another piece from out of the TWWA is that just surviving is a revolutionary act if you're a person of color in this country. Survival, wow. That's not only sad, but for me it produces a kind of anger that people are treated in a way that doesn't allow them to act in their own best interest.

Davenport's words encourage us to see Third World/intersectional feminist theories not as resources to be hoarded but as processes that engage people in identifying their embodied knowledges and articulating their rage at unjust systems. She connects this political depth and slow deliberate work of movement building to the patience required of an archivist. Drawing connections between the work of organizing and the work of archiving, she encourages us to think about the deep affinities between these labors:

> [The TWWA is] a model to me of how to organize at a grassroots level as well as at other levels. Yeah, but *beginning* with the grassroots, beginning with that. Building from—I don't want to call it the bottom—but building from a baseline, you know? Like, what's wrong with this picture? And then ask yourself, why is this so? How has your mind been colonized? But you have to ask those questions—you have to. And that's what I mean by going deep. I mean, maybe you get some of it wrong, but you get some things right. And then you go on, and try to figure it out. You have to have patience. As an archivist, I'll tell you, you have to be *patient* to archive things! It takes a great deal of patience, sitting and thinking and looking and paying attention to every single thing. Yes, you have to do that. Otherwise, we'll get nowhere, you know?

Here, Davenport crystallizes an approach to social-movement archiving that mirrors the painstaking work of consciousness-raising and organizing—one that foregrounds patience and a critique of colonial epistemologies. Given the painstaking and patient nature of this work, how does this approach translate into pedagogy and the time/resources necessary to circulate the archives beyond Smith College? Professors who teach with the TWWA archives have developed pedagogical strategies for engaging social-movement exigencies in their work and doing research organizers do not always have time or support to do. For example, professor Jennifer Guglielmo's students have used archival materials, including the TWWA's, to build digital timeline training materials for a domestic worker-led organization that wants members to understand themselves as part of a long lineage of social-movement organizing. The students respond directly to the organizers' asks and engage in collaborative digital compositions that then become on-the-ground training materials. These concrete connections offer ways of thinking about archives as a site of interdisciplinary, public pedagogies that take a lead from the slow work of both movement- and archive building.

## EMBODIED REFLECTIONS, LESSONS, AND ONGOING QUESTIONS

As I engaged in these questions with Davenport, we were both prompted to reflect on how our identities and lived experiences shape our understandings of archival work and its politics. Davenport and I are both non-Black women of color who were drawn to radical Black feminist politics. Indeed, I encountered the Alliance for the first time in Dr. Gwendolyn Pough's Black Feminist Theories course when we read founding member Frances Beal's "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." Davenport and I share an understanding that our own "ins" to women-of-color feminisms and organizing are indebted to Black feminisms. This understanding impacts the way we each understand our own identities while doing this work—we understand our own politics as always oriented to the interventions of radical Black feminisms and womanisms.

Davenport and I are both from mixed Asian families (her, Filipina/Scottish; me, Indian/Irish/Italian), and together we reflected on the fact that the TWWA is an important reference point to counter ongoing depictions of Asian Americans as model minorities. Professors at Smith note that histories like the TWWA's help students of color see themselves as historical actors and part of a long line of communities of struggle; this was also the case for the two of us. The model minority trope not only serves to divide would-be multiracial coalitions, it erases insurgent Asian American struggles. As Davenport put it, "Asian Americans have been speaking truth to power since the immigration of Chinese and Japanese and South Asian people into the United States for work, primarily. And so there have been many many Asian American revolts against this system of oppression that left them working for a bowl of rice." Davenport was also struck by the archival evidence of the TWWA's involvement in the United Farm Workers struggle, for example, their work to help build the Agbayani retirement village for elderly

farm workers.[7] Davenport connected it to her father's experience as a seasonal farm worker, demonstrating the power of learning history that writes your body into histories of struggle. For me, researching the TWWA led me to reflect on the lack of involvement of South Asian women in the group—a gap that now animates my research on the racialization of South Asians in the United States in relation to women-of-color feminist politics.

Through discussing these connections, Davenport and I drew connections to the strange experience of encountering the TWWA history in institutions of higher education and their class-mobility imperative set alongside the "class-suicide" imperative of antiimperialist social movements (to quote Amilcar Cabral). On this topic, Davenport connected the TWWA's white paper on "careerism" to her work with the Brick Hut Cafe. She noted that she and another working-class woman were the only two people left at the end of the cafe's life because others left to pursue careers and middle-class lives:

> [The TWWA's white paper on careerism] spoke to me of how because of the necessity of earning a living, women often chose to leave revolutionary groups because they weren't making any money, or enough money to maybe have a lifestyle that they were seeking. At any rate, this was called careerism. So they quit groups that were making a difference in the street, for women of color, in order to go and get a degree or maybe change directions and seek a career. So you have to ask yourself, *who has time to devote to revolution*? Are you willing to give up all of the luxuries of a middle-class life in order to further the revolution?

Davenport's final question asks those of us who work full time in institutions of higher education to critically interrogate the limitations of our work there but also to orient to the insurgent social-movement histories that animate higher education—histories that crossed over into the TWWA's. Members of the TWWA were active in the Third World Liberation Strike at San Francisco State University and the CUNY student strike. The TWWA archives show many moments of crossing over into campus spaces for meetings and events, and members taught ethnic studies courses.[8] Without Davenport's labor, these examples of the "porous borders" ("An Interview") of what is often consolidated as "campus" and "community" would be hidden.

For me, one of the central lessons of this archival project is to honor the TWWA's many methods of theory- and movement building, alongside the often-invisible, "tedious but honorable" work of archiving these histories. I share Davenport's words as a call to those of us who study the craft and context of writing to make visible the labors that build our contexts for writing, theorizing, and pedagogy making.

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7 See "Agbayani Work Brigade, United Farm Workers" for information on the TWWA's involvement.

8 See "Dear Sisters" regarding an evaluation meeting that would take place October 16, 1976, at the Women's Center Lounge at UC Berkeley.

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# Honoring Languages: Review of *Creole Composition: Academic Writing in the Anglophone Caribbean*, edited by Vivette Milson-Whyte, Raymond Oenbring, & Brianne Jaquette

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**Abstract**
Ways of valuing and celebrating Caribbean creole languages and their users present challenges to educators, students, regionally and internationally. *Creole Composition* focuses on how to foster composition pedagogy among Creole-influenced language users. In this groundbreaking book, classroom teachers, scholars, and administrators offer an eclectic array of approaches with the aim of writing "in" Caribbean ways of composing." Teaching composition that is mindful of the impact of Caribbean Creole can have profound implications for ongoing scholarship, pedagogical frameworks, and writing program administration.

**Key Words**
creole composition, caribbean rhetoric, creole-influences languages, creolese, teaching composition

> *The bell crier: [In the voice of a Caribbean street market vendor]*
> *Biling Bang! Biling bang! [Sound of the School Bell he rings]*
> Notaaace!
> Read it 'ere! Read it 'ere!
> Teacha dem a-teach Reggae inna school
> Pickney dem writin 'bout dem tings
> Dem a-call it Creole Kampa-zi-shan
> Dem seh, it gat value inna U-Wee [UWI!]
> An' value inna village, tuh!
> Deh using we own ting!
> Read it! Read it! Read inna dis book
> - Creole Kampa-zi-shan!

Dear Reader,

In traditional Caribbean villages such as Buxton Village, where I grew up, a bell crier went from street to street ringing a school bell. In a booming voice he proclaimed important announcements and news beginning with the word "Notaaace." Children imitated him shouting, "Notaaace"; mothers stopped hanging out their washing; men halted their bicycles; everyone within the hearing of the bell crier's voice stopped and listened. After listening, they carried the news further, by word of mouth: *Mattie tell mattie an' frien' tell frien*. Before the bell crier reached the outer areas of the village, many villagers would have already heard the news. Furthermore, many of those people continued to circulate the information by word of mouth.

Like traditional bell criers, Vivette Milson-Whyte, Raymond Oenbring, and Brianne Jaquette, along with 14 contributors to *Creole Composition*, announced, "We are here. And we doin' dis—'write [ing] our way in" to academic spaces (2019, p. x). After reading this book, I shared their news with my community via Facebook and YouTube.[1]

1 See "Yuh Mean Yuh Go Write Am Too?: A Tale of a Note Composed in Class" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2YuovWjTuw&t=1s and "Wah Lisa Bin Seh?" < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckeNMEdEteY&t=19s>

Consequently, this story, in which I use Creolese, is referenced in social discourse by people at university in language and linguistics, women and gender courses, and on other public social media platforms. Indeed, our Creole composition practices can carry all our cultural experiences with flexible and relatable ways of doing so! Dear Reader, as you read, please bear in mind the role of the bell crier and do likewise—take the news further to raise consciousness, to enhance pedagogy, and to transform communities.

*Creole Composition* (2019) provides current perspectives on postsecondary composition pedagogy, academic literacies, and research across multiple academic disciplines. Indeed, this intersectionality addresses Kevin Browne's (2013) argument that Caribbean vernacular orientations and practices fly beneath the radar of the discipline of rhetoric and composition. Caribbean institutions of higher learning must embrace Anglophone Caribbean students' Creole-influenced languages. In 366 pages, six sections, and 12 chapters, 17 classroom teachers, scholar-practitioners, and researchers propose ways of creating "uniquely Caribbean" writing pedagogies.

## MY INTEREST IN CREOLE COMPOSITION

I am interested in *Creole Composition* because I, too, have and use my Creole-influenced languages. I was raised and educated in the Caribbean, in Guyana, a former British Colony, where we speak Creolese, English, and a mixture of both. Writing was a part of my elementary and secondary school education. However, process writing prevalent in first-year composition instruction in many tertiary institutions in the United States had not taken hold when I was a student in Guyana during the 1980s and the 1990s. Writing expectations were high. In the top-tiered secondary schools, students' written language had to measure up to the Standard British English. Some say we had to be *more British than the British*. At university, teachers assumed students could write essays well, using Standard British English. However, students' writing was heavily Creole-influenced, and those students who used "bad English" got red ink marks on their assignments. Teachers made those marks to highlight the errors the students made. Common remarks about who speaks "bad English" or "broken" English are still prevalent today, in Guyana.

In a letter to the editor of the *Kaiteur News* in Guyana, the final-year students of the class Language and Society II, at the University of Guyana, Berbice Campus, wrote their perspectives on the functions and values of Creolese in Guyanese society. They argued that Creolese language is governed by linguistic systems that are distinct from English and that "Guyanese Creole is not a 'broken' or 'substandard' dialect of English" (para. 5). Three years earlier, Henry Singh (2019),[2] in a letter to the editor of *Kaiteur News* titled "Creole versus Standard English," concluded that users of Guyanese creole are "unfairly stigmatized." In the same article, Singh (2019) concurred with Hubert Devonish, a distinguished professor of linguistics at the University of the West Indies, Mona campus, who revisited the role and value of Creole languages in March 2019. Devonish argued that the "pervasive and longstanding false perception that those who can only use the Guyanese Creolese are 'not bright' has naturally stymied the educational and social progress of these 'lesser than'" (para. 2). In essence, Devonish and Singh contest the commonly held belief that not only do students who speak Creole languages lack confidence, but also they face a future likened to a "wasteland" due to effects of their Creole-language dominance. These observations indicate continuing concerns about how the "standard and nonstandard, allowed or stigmatized affect[ed] the speech and writing choices" on people in academic and civil society (p. x). Teachers still castigate students about their "broken English," even though such English is dominant in the home, in commercial transactions, and in social life.

## APPROACHES TO CREOLE COMPOSITION

The need for writing pedagogies that bridge the gap between Caribbean rhetoric and composition pedagogy in the Caribbean have become apparent, with composition instruction gaining prevalence (Baker-Bell, 2013; Bell & Lardner, 2005; Canagarajah, 2006, 2009, 2013; Haddix, 2015; Milson-Whyte, 2015; Nero, 2013, among others). However, the question remains, Where do we start? Carmeneta Jones and Jacob Dryer Spiegel note that in the discussion of composition pedagogies, personal and academic experiences must not be viewed as remote and "separate strains of our existence" but rather part of an integrated curriculum (p. 19). However, what can pedagogies of integration look like? Integrated strains of composition pedagogies invite, include, and celebrate Caribbean people's personal experiences, reflections, and languages.

As an example, in Section One, "Reflections on Linguistic Turmoil," Jones and Dryer Spiegel address postsecondary educational pedagogy and regional controversies to give a cursory background to their Creole composition pedagogy. These teachers use reflection to illustrate the value of personal narratives in composition. Jones teaches students to draw on their own language histories as material or subject matter for composition. Jones reflects on her Jamaican Creole language-learning histories to challenge the notion that local languages should be abandoned at the schoolhouse door. Her work adds to the efforts of building up Caribbean studies writing scholarship.

Jones proposes a bilingual framework for Caribbean writing instruction and various strategies to teach writing to build literacies. For example, she uses student-generated stories based on African

2 A University of Guyana lecturer in the Use of English.

stories, teacher-created poetry of mixed Creole and English, reader's theater, and videos. Students and teachers can use the Creole languages of the wider community and English to carry out all their cultural experiences as a means of developing literacies and teaching strategies.

To explore the sociocultural impact of Creole language use in higher education, like Jones, Dryer Spiegel's students examine language through their cultural lenses and learn about varieties of languages, including their own—to embrace or not to embrace them. Overall, Jones and Dryer Spiegel's work opens the door to early intervention at the preuniversity level. These examples illustrate that students do not have to wait until they get to graduate school to experience composing with Caribbean rhetorical practices, as I did. In my dissertation and projects that followed, I used an "asking methodology" practiced in my village to enact a cultural rhetorics approach to Caribbean rhetoric. This methodology is called "Wah dih story seh?" It is a saying and question Guyanese use to greet each other and to share news. I used the question to gather stories, which I delivered to my professors, my fellow graduate students, and my village community. I did not translate my Creolese language because I believe I created opportunities for my audience to ask questions and to learn.

My dissertation, "Towards a Cultural Rhetorics Approach to Caribbean Rhetoric: African Guyanese Women From the Village of Buxton Transforming Oral History," is written in English and Creolese. It consists of several letters written in Creolese and English language to "Young Buxtonians" (natives of Buxton Village, Guyana) and my dissertation committee. I recorded, told, and explored the theories behind Buxton Village women's stories after interviewing Buxton women living in the Bahamas, New York City, and Buxton Village.

My purpose for addressing the young Buxtonians directly in Creolese language is to affirm that our stories matter and that those stories have a place in tertiary education. Further, I demonstrated how I could bear our stories and culture using our Creolese language and village women's stories to teach the dissertation committee. Indeed, as the editors of *Creole Composition* opine, our Creole languages can bear all our experiences. In essence, I transported our stories—the women and my stories—and wrote dem in, thereby making space for our oral histories, language, and voices to be seen and heard.

Making space for Creole composition endeavors requires allies in the discipline of rhetoric and writing, the village, and Caribbean scholar-mentors. Here is a story: When I decided to conduct oral-history research to showcase the voices and stories of the women of my village, I lost my dissertation chair. Weeks before writing my dissertation proposal, I consulted with several Guyanese scholars at a meeting of the Guyana Cultural Association, New York, asking their perspectives on my writing about the subject of voice. I wanted to know if that kind of research was needed. It was, they said. Next, they asked me who I was going to interview, and I explained I would conduct research only in archival written texts—there would be no interviews. They did not support my idea of not talking to village people.

As I regard them now, those scholar-mentors implored me to *write our people in* by talking to villagers directly. Hence, my conviction grew that I should write our people's stories in our language *in my dissertation.* I shared this story of how I came to my conviction—that not only should I talk, I should write about voice by involving human subjects—with my dissertation chair. She told me in no uncertain terms that she could no longer be my chair.

I was determined to defend my dissertation that included oral histories of women from the village, and I did. My new dissertation chair, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, is an Indigenous scholar who understood the need for my research that included Creolese. My story is just one example of scenarios that both deter and inspire students at the tertiary level when pursuing writing studies in and with their Creole languages. I wrote a dissertation in a format I had never seen before. It includes the natural Creolese language of the women. Many Caribbean people appreciate the passing on of their oral traditions in their particular forms and manners. For example, the maxim "as mih buy am suh mih sell am" is a way of providing verbatim records and transcripts of women's oral stories. Thus, I enacted "as mih buy am suh mih sell am" to demonstrate how to write Caribbean people into composition, thereby celebrating our languages in composition, teaching, and research endeavours.

Dear Reader, many people remain disdainful of Creole-language use for academic purposes. Hence, to extend this discourse of making composition work for Caribbean students in postsecondary education, I envision professors supporting more writing projects that use Creole languages. Like Jones, I use personal experiences, situate family stories, and make visible hidden, forgotten, and practiced traditions that are part of Caribbean rhetoric to provide digital storytelling weekly on Facebook. My public pedagogy teaches my community inside and outside the academy that village people deh right 'ere, and we/I bring dis language wid me/us and straddle multiple educational domains and media. It is vital for our stories of how we compose our narratives to exist on social media, where young people socialize. Our stories and language must take their places alongside other dominant stories. If not, students will come to think they are not valued.

## HOW *CREOLE COMPOSITION* INFLUENCES MY COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY AT UNIVERSITY

As a teacher of the first-year composition course at the University of Guam, I use integrated pedagogies. For example, in the introductory course material, I share Caribbean proverbs: *Waan*

*Dutty Build Dam* and *Waan Cocoa Full Basket*.[3] In doing so, I set my expectations that the students should persist and progress by taking small steps towards writing their essays. I explain that the proverbs are words of wisdom from African Caribbean grandmothers, passed down over generations. I invite the students who are mainly from the Asia Pacific region to share what they bring to the classroom from their own cultures. The students' answers become part of their first written assignment. Students write letters to themselves in which they explain the histories of their names after researching within their families. For this assignment, students are encouraged to use their languages. Many of the students express pleasant surprise. Many say it is the first time they have been asked to examine and use (any and all) languages. The students use Chamorro, Tagalog, gaming language, Janglish, religious language, slang, and the like. The students also conduct Internet research on World Englishes, code meshing, code switching, and translanguaging and share their reflections during their in-class discussion forum. Consequently, the students make connections to their linguistic and geographic communities, identity, language and composition, among others. Indeed, *Creole Composition* can advance efforts to open doors for students in the Caribbean and globally to see and hear each other's communities and humanity.

> [Street Corner 1]*The bell crier: Biling Bang! Biling bang! Notaaace!*
> Take notice!
> Trouble deh a-dih classroom.
> Plenty trouble, mih seh!
> But plenty remedy deh inna dis book, tuh!
> Read wah it seh
> Hear wah it seh!

The authors in *Creole Composition* alert readers to the idea that in teaching composition studies, one must be aware of certain conditions, namely 1) students' Creole-influenced language in written discourse persists and often affects students' writing processes; 2) students' Creole-influenced language can also affect students' ease of access to education and their achievement of social equity; 3) many students live with the constant reminder that their native tongue is a hindrance; 4) some students place marginal value on Caribbean Creole-language use and its role in their own linguistic diversity; 5) even Caribbean academics do not hold the use of Creole-influenced language in school in high regard; 6) academics also use Creole-influenced languages, unconsciously. What these conditions highlight is that there are opportunities for more development of visible scholarship on Caribbean-oriented postsecondary writing pedagogy. Teachers can use this resource to learn more about composition pedagogy and the needs of Caribbean writers at home and abroad. Due to migration, many Caribbean students attend university overseas and *Creole Composition* is a valuable resource for meeting the needs of those students. *Creole Composition* (2019) should be part of the assigned readings of all students in teacher training. Likewise, it should be a part of graduate school reading and seminars for Ph.D. students in rhetoric and composition, at the very least.

Having taught in the Caribbean, Guam, Japan, and Palau, I wish I'd had a book like *Creole Composition* earlier in my career because I would have learned how to navigate teaching writing to students with Creole-influenced languages. With this book as a resource, classroom teachers can use the examples provided to help students negotiate meaning and written expressions in their home and school languages. The compound effect will be that we, educators, will develop our own strategies and broaden our practices that reflect how people "do" language in life, pedagogy, and scholarship (Pough, 2011).

As a Caribbean Creole-influenced person, teacher, and scholar, my interests are intersectional scholarship, theories, classroom exercises, discourses, case studies, and autobiographies. Hence, I welcome the use of poetry, song, and drama as writing inventions and composition starters. Students interact with a Caribbean writer by reading excerpts from Jamaica Kincaid. For example, in one of my university's advanced composition classes, students examined voice in poetry, letters, video essays, and their writing alongside scholars' works. I have used Jamaica Kincaid for discussion about voice and composition among first-year college writing students. Going forward, I could include excerpts from Amy Carpenter Ford or several of the scholars mentioned earlier to situate and constellate how they and others do composition.

In my experience, undergraduates can and do want to read scholarship about writing that informs them of how others write. I envision that if teachers take an integrated or eclectic approach of including scholarship from African American and Caribbean writers, among others, they will open up conversations on inclusion, identity, equity, and empowerment even at the undergraduate level (Baker-Bell, 2013; Carpenter Ford, 2013; Gilyard & Richardson, 2001; Haddix, 2015; Jackson, Michel, Sheridan, & Stumpf, 2001; Kincaid, 1978).

*Creole Composition* (2019) celebrates hybrid approaches to composition that incorporate the linguistic diversity of Caribbean people. A pluralistic approach advances effort aimed at enhancing writing studies that is more "agile" in "meeting the needs of "diverse student populations" around the world (Milson-White, Oenbring & Jaquette, p. 7). However, what are some ways of advancing more inclusive Creole-influenced language pedagogies? Educators can do the following:

1). Use reflective writing and draw on their own teaching experiences, case studies, and research to learn the best ways to teach writing to students with Creole-influenced languages. Provide students with readings about Edward Kamau Brathwaite's use

3 Waan = One

of Nation Language. Nation Language includes African language retentions, diaspora languages, and everyday expressions of Caribbean people. I envision students examining their language with fresh eyes to negotiate their written voice and identity, among others (Dryer-Spiegel, p. 99).

2). Include students in the discussions of research and practice to demonstrate how Creole-influenced languages of Caribbean students can be celebrated, used, and valued in academic writing courses. More discursively, advocates of code meshing in composition seek to empower students to communicate using their knowledge of various Englishes (Milson-White, 2015; Young & Martinez, 2011). That said, what are some ways of teaching students with Creole-influenced languages?

## BACKGROUND, PAIN POINTS, VISIBILITY

Milson-Whyte, Oenbring & Jaquette (pp. 3-7) argue that the state of postsecondary writing pedagogy in the Anglophone Caribbean is in flux due to a dearth in three key areas:

1) the application of composition scholarship and a rhetorical base,
2) outmoded Anglophone writing instruction, and
3) dueling systems of education (British and U.S.).

Furthermore, although writing is taught at the postsecondary level, scholarly writing in the Anglophone Caribbean has mostly come from applied linguistics and U.S. institutions. Scholarship addressing composition outside of the United States tends to be situated in studies on the communicative aspects of language use—translanguaging and translingualism, as noted in the works of a leading scholar, Suresh Canagarajah. In sum, imported composition models continue to influence composition pedagogy unduly.

Traditionally Caribbean postsecondary educators adopted colonial and neocolonial models of composition. Educators drew on pedagogical principles from Britain and the United States, respectively. Teachers placed heavy emphasis on the current traditional model of written discourse. Written fluency was determined by grammatical correctness, lofty language, and elegant style in colonial models of academic writing and overall students' writing as finished products was privileged (*Creole Composition*, 2019).

Currently, some Caribbean higher education institutions are adopting U.S. composition pedagogy. Students experience an iterative process in which they produce several written drafts of their essays; however, there is no unified approach to the teaching of composition.

Three overarching concerns are:

1) How we teach students to view themselves as writers;
2) How pedagogy is "inextricably linked to how we teach them to view themselves as people and as citizens of their countries and the world";
3) How we can create a praxis for teaching writing that is both uniquely Caribbean and also draw[s] on previous international studies regarding best practices at the post-secondary level (p. xi)

The good news is that Milson-Whyte, Oenbring & Jaquette place Caribbean Creole language studies in the discipline of composition studies and expose several ways of being heard and seen. The authors advocate for Caribbean Creole-influenced writing. A strong pro-Caribbean writing focus is a " view of the writing classroom [that] has not historically been part of writing instruction in the Caribbean, but it is gaining prevalence as the pedagogy of composition is being more widely considered in the region" ( p. xi). Hence, *Creole Composition* is a welcome resource that situates students' writing with(in) both national and global educational conversations.

> *The bell crier: Biling Bang! Biling bang! Notaaace!*
> [Street Corner 2]
> Take notice!
> Bad feelings 'bout dem writing
> is wah dem pickney does feel, inna school.
> Island time a-cause plenty trouble.
> Dem teacha fed up wid dih late coming
> and dih late assignment, from college pickney!
> Plenty trouble?
> Plenty remedy deh inna dis book, too!
> Read it inna Section Two!

The culture of "island time" and traumatic learning experiences present a challenging teaching environment. In Section Two, "Empirical Studies of Attitudes and Time Management," Christine Kozikowski and Melissa Alleyne call for more empirical studies on time management and attitudes towards composition. In "Academic Writing in the Caribbean," Alleyne argues that attitudes matter. No doubt is actual student engagement in writing important; however, a composite of sociocultural conditions is integral to her belief, such as the Creole-influenced language user's motivation, preparedness, beliefs about writing and performance, and academic expectations to be considered. Indeed, an approach to writing that considers how students writing "practice" drafts will raise students' self-confidence, lower anxiety, and heighten their regard for the value of skill building in writing. Kozikowski's study "Teaching on Island Time" can help teachers connect procrastination, island time, and final grades to demonstrate to students the mismatches between their perceptions and the realities of their performance. In the Jamaican context, teachers overuse the term *expression* to classify various errors in student's writing. That said,

teachers' written feedback often lacks uniformity and tends to be harsh and vague.

Overall, *Creole Composition* gives teachers and researchers examples of frameworks for change and growth, including exploring pedagogy and research on Creole-influenced composing practices, with(in) and outside of the classroom located physically in the Caribbean. Bear in mind that many Caribbean students attend school in the United States, where they are stigmatized, misunderstood, and placed in remedial classes. A broader understanding of their literacies extends research in Caribbean students' writing (Nero, 2006). Consequently, the authors make appeals for more empirical studies on a) current attitudes towards educating students who use Creole languages inside and outside of academic settings, b) Caribbean people's perspectives on promoting multilingualism, and c) teaching strategies within postcolonial Anglophone Caribbean education. A postcolonial hybrid framework advances Caribbean Creole-influenced writing at the postsecondary level, at home and abroad. For interventions, they draw on empirical studies, classroom pedagogy, and personal reflection to outline a more visible approach for recognizing and incorporating Caribbean rhetoric in schools and civil discourse (Browne, 2013).

> *The bell crier: Biling Bang! Biling bang! Notaaace!*
> [Street Corner 3]
> Listen nah!
> Nuff-nuff language deh in dih inna classroom.
> How fuh grade dem pappa?
> Dih scholars got good news!
> Dis story good fuh all kind people from all ova, dih world!
> Here nuh, if you eva got problems
> wid how dem teacha does mark
> yuh writin' and gramma,
> find out some a-dih reason dem!
> Mouth open, story jump out!
> Look-oo 'ere
> Eye-tellin' yuh!
> Leh we talk 'bout Section Three
> Inna dih book

In Section Three, "Perspectives on Language and Error," Annife Campbell addresses the systems for grading and student's and teacher's attitudes towards writing. Campbell's essay "Understanding the Shifting Marking Community's Response to Students' Writing" provides quantitative and qualitative data gathered from teachers in three disciplines at one campus of the University of the West Indies. If classroom teachers and administrators are interested in interdisciplinary writing, they can leverage these interdisciplinary research data on assessment, grammar, and translanguaging Campbell provides.

Daidrah Smith and Michelle Stewart-McKoy argue for "Balancing Composition and Grammar." A bilingual approach in early formal education to teaching grammar can teach a wide range of Creole-influenced students. At a teacher's training college in Guyana, one of my professors argued that we must teach English with an English-as-a-second-language approach. Doing so, we would position our students as multilingual. The extent of her conviction ended with the argument. She presented no methodology nor training on how to implement her view.

Many student's first language is Caribbean English Creole (Ali, p. 258). Indeed, we spoke English and Creolese, with the latter not formalized and used in written discourse. However, the absence of formal bilingual instruction in schools does not mean children receive no instruction. I remember my parents and other children's parents continually translating our Creolese into the English language in my home or on the street. For example, if while walking down the road we remarked, "look wah duh man ah-du," an adult might instruct us this way: "Say after me. Look at what the man is doing." We had to obey. Sometimes their version of Standard English was not accurate; nevertheless, those parents or adults would still instruct us. Thus, even while I did not speak Standard English for most of my childhood, I understood the differences between the two languages because of my parents' informal instruction and instruction in school and church. These kinds of speech acts and pedagogy occur among many Guyanese and Caribbean people.

At home in Guyana, in my childhood, adults allowed us to speak Creolese language at home. If educators embrace the notion that students are multilingual, as my former professor implied, I envision teachers pivoting to teaching both Creole and English. They would lead with a direct understanding that students are writing to be heard and not merely to acquire a homogenized or monolingual standard. What is at stake then is students' positioning for writing with power and flexibility, having a strong cultural understanding of their language in a globalized context. Student writing samples, in Chapter 7, highlight, bridge, and extend discourse to include diversity and freedom in using "linguistic cyphers" transnationally (Mitchell, pp. 211- 216). Indeed, situating scholarship of Caribbean Creole languages and African American language broadens the scope of national conversations on students' rights to their own language. Overall, a framework based on more sociocultural understandings can inform a developmental approach to writing and marking writing. What would a regional approach to writing entail, however?

> [Street Corner 4]*The bell crier: Biling Bang! Biling bang! Notaaace!*
> One Caribbean, many languages!
> One Caribbean, how fuh manage dih-writing administration inna dih university?
> How fuh do dih languages?
> Section 4 got dih tings!

In Section Four, Clover Jones McKenzie, Beverly Josephs, and Tyrone Ali, content teachers and university administrators,

address some perspectives on academic literacies in "Institutional Contexts." Ali, an administrator, showcases "Solving Problems and Signaling Potential in Writing Program Administration at the University of the West Indies St. Augustine Campus (UWISTA)" over 15 years. What I appreciate is his clear overview of the immense work, direction, growth, and challenges of managing a writing program in a Caribbean university. Ali clarifies my understanding of the challenges administrators face. Writing in nested contexts in the Caribbean has comprised the academic programs, the writing center, the historical background of UWISTA since 1966.

Additionally, the current issues about and solutions to writing program administration (WPA) on several other campuses on various sites in Caribbean nations, and funding to operate them, all merge in a challenging mix. Ali offers a WPA's perspective that educators can model to set up a similar venture. Ali outlines a multipronged approach that resembles a recipe for making a dish. His recipe draws on 14 years of well-marinated successful practice for change.

> Ingredients and Method
>
> First, carefully gather 7 academic writing courses and 3 language workshops and fold them into a mixture. Set aside to marinate.
>
> Second, harvest input from the 9 full-time faculty, 20 part-time instructional staff, 3 clerical staff, and 1 research assistant. Examine carefully, and add these to the marinade for flavoring.
>
> Next, sprinkle exactly 3 sittings of an English Language Proficiency Test. Annually ONLY!
>
> Then, open up your web-enabled learning educational framework and add all the ingredients.
>
> Let simmer consistently for 14 years.
>
> Caution: Be sure to eyeball the whole dish and sprinkle in some oral and written communication exams for incoming students from time to time. It's all good!
>
> From time to time, scoop up and add some blended learning based on sound linguistic and pedagogical theories and drop them in, like dumplings, alongside several teaching practices.
>
> Before plating, cool down with the limited services of the Writing Center.
>
> Be careful when lifting the pot, as large programs are hard to manage, and successes get easily spilled.
>
> Finally, plate and decorate against the backdrop of a campus that is evolving and using scarce resources. Be sure to take a side of harmonizing goals. Pick from the various disciplinary side dishes, as you like (p. 250). Overall, Ali's recipe for the writing-program-administration plate makes space for supporting strategies, with a sprig of fresh spiral learning, and garnished with varied writing assignments and assessments.
>
> Big-up oono self!
>
> This dish is fit for all palates, including those of finicky and picky faculty, among others.
>
> [Street Corner 5] *The bell crier: Biling Bang! Biling bang! Notaaace!*
> If they like to tell stories, let dem talk in class!
> Join up dih classical wid dih Caribbean.
> Nothing wrong wid dat?
> Gud, gud strategies fuh do dat! Inna dih book!
> Read dem in 5 and 6!

Section Five offers "Regional Perspectives: Archipelagic Thinking." The authors Raymond Oenbring and Valerie Combie call for solidarity and purpose. Thus, against the backdrop of Tyrone Ali's writing program discourse, Raymond Oenbring returns to classical rhetoric and orality and situates Caribbean rhetoric (Browne, 2013). Oenbring, in "The Small Island Polis," in Chapter 10, suggests the use of code meshing to address the "complex realities" and polarizing factors of how individuals "do language" in context. I admit, when Oenbring drew my attention to the study of classical rhetoric through progymnasmata, he piqued my curiosity. He connects oral presentations to classical rhetors. He uses orality to help students make historical connections to classical rhetoric and Caribbean rhetoric, especially Nation Language. Oenbring uses group discussions and oral presentations as part of students' independent and class projects to make their arguments in Creole languages. Teachers of first-year writing can follow his step-by-step explanations and examples of how to lay the foundations of developmental and conceptual scaffolding in teaching argument (p. 278–80). That said, Oenbring is concerned that some teachers might fear that discussion-heavy lessons will take away from students' time on task in class.

On the contrary, I believe time spent on oral arguments as invention exercises and main projects will be well spent. This strategy benefits me, and can do the same for others teaching writing to students from primary oral cultures, such as Pacific Island cultures. For example, my students have made video arguments and clear connections to writing in college. Those students can also examine their oral practices and find the strength to launch into other cultures' traditions, such as the Greeks. In sum, students of Caribbean, African, and African American cultures, among others, can spend time drawing on familiar rhetorical

practices to understand the unfamiliar and develop critical thinking (Banks, 2011).

In Section Six, "A Way Forward," Clover Jones McKenzie, Trescka Campbell-Dawes, and Heather Robinson argue for a pluralist approach to composition in the postcolonial era. To that end, Robinson, citing Shondel Nero (2006), posits that students will validate "a multiplicity of Englishes" from within the Caribbean (p. 330). Writing should enable students to construct their identities and position themselves as writers alongside, with(in), and among other languages. The way forward is to cultivate people who manipulate language intentionally to value the writing they produce.

McKenzie and Campbell-Dawes examine Creole language interference and its role in the teaching of Caribbean Standard English (CSE). They argue that teachers themselves struggle to distinguish standard and nonstandard English due to their own Creole-influenced language use. Standards for passing required courses and meaningful learning are some of the solutions the writers offer. Combie suggests that scholars, researchers, and practitioners unite to share resources to build writing studies in the region. Educators should promote multilingualism for the Creole-influenced language classroom as a seedbed. On the one hand, they should capitalize on teaching moments as students use languages. On the other hand, they should implement teacher training, among others. One worrisome suggestion is that students take multiple levels of English composition courses like those in the U.S. higher education system. I wonder if it is worth considering the knock-on effects on values, cost, and access to education within Caribbean economic structures.

> *The bell crier: Biling Bang! Biling bang! Notaaace!*
> Take notice!
> Good news! Good news!
> Dih author dem of dih book *Creole Composition* announce.
> Dem seh that Caribbean Creole has value inna academia and civil society.
> Read it here! Read it here!
> Dem talk story, dem use poems fuh teach everyday literary art forms.
> Yes, dem teacha usin' Reggae, an' other song, texts, and media fuh teach.
> Reggae done been valued around dih worl'. Eh-eh!
> Mek mih glad . . . deh using we own ting!
> How dem do it? Read it!
> Read it inna yuh own book!

Dear Reader, composition remains an urgent topic in Caribbean postsecondary education. *Creole Composition* is a necessary discourse that is long overdue. This book is not a quick read. It offers in-depth research, pedagogy, and personal experiences. Applying and expanding on the subject matter of Creole composition and its approaches will profoundly affect interdisciplinary research literacy and composition pedagogies. I look forward to experimenting with code meshing in my first-year writing classes in the Asia Pacific region and the Caribbean.

Overall, I hear the authors of *Creole Composition* as bell criers. They have spread the news—scholars, students, parents, and universities worry about the academic literacies of students. *Creole Composition* is a groundbreaking work that does what it asks—to build a writing studies discipline. Moving more closely towards that goal—to write *weself* in—the scholars pooled their resources, showing that Caribbean writing studies programs, scholarship, and civil and professional engagements are possible. *Creole Composition* should be required reading for scholars and teachers working in the Caribbean. It is a valuable resource for Caribbean nationals, including those living in Europe, Canada, and around the world, in light or heavy concentrations, who are looking for ways to build Caribbean pedagogical frameworks.

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**Acknowledgements**

*A big thank you to intellectuals inside and outside the Caribbean and the academy who keep our Caribbean languages and composition issues alive. I thank the educators who fight for the use of Creole languages in tertiary education. To Ian Stevenson who spent many hours giving me editing feedback on my draft, thank you!*