

Does Every Lesbian Have a Superpower that Makes Them Out and Not Dead by Suicide?: A Poetics against Standardizing Literacy Narratives

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Whether or not we can safely attribute the following scholium to Kant's kiss—it may well be worth pondering the possibility to think and kiss at the same time.

—Eric O. Clarke

Part I: A Literacy Narrative Does Every Lesbian Have a Superpower that Makes Them Out and Not Dead by Suicide?

I've been taking the L Train a lot these days. Partly because on the weekends the J/Z hasn't been running from Manhattan to Brooklyn, nor has been the M. And then partly because the growing literary scene in Bushwick can no longer be resisted. I don't like the L, but I do. It's complicated. I do not like Williamsburg. And the L is a Williamsburg train filled with folk heading to Williamsburg. I have the superiority of an OG and an anger of the colonized and displaced. In college I would call Williamsburg: Queens.

I was from real Brooklyn. Grew up round the corner from the most dangerous drug block in the city. My building was safe. The kingpin's daughter living in the apartment below. I always wondered, if I knew drugs were being distributed from the corner window in the large lobby of high alabaster ceilings, fireplace, and marble floors where we would roller-skate and play tag, then how could the cops not know. My grandmother's house was in Crown Heights, the heart of the Caribbean and Hasidism. In college, I would never get off the 2/3 at Grand Army Plaza the borderline of the (then) hood and Park Slope. I did not want to be identified as the Slopie I was: born and educated there through junior high (Methodist Hospital, playgroup, 3rd Street playground, Prospect Park, Pino's, Little Things, Community Bookstore, Pioneer, Food Co-op, Tarzian's, Cracker Jack, Berkley Carroll, 321, Garfield Temple afterschool, St. Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church, St. Francis Savior's

softball team, the rainbow program at 51s). In college, I would get off at Eastern Parkway with the other Black people, brown people, the working class. And then, a decade or so later, I would make a point to get off at Grand Army Plaza and not Eastern Parkway. I'd rather be seen as a Slopie than a gentrifier. I was from real Brooklyn.

There was one time not too long ago on the subway platform at Grand Army Plaza a white woman with a bicycle asked me to give her my seat because she needed the aisle because of her bicycle. I had heard about the white entitlement of the people moving into my old neighborhoods, but this was the first time I had encountered it up close. I told her no and honestly was amused.

These days on the L, I like to stand in the crunch of the crowds and not hold on to any poles. A performance of balance and skill. I might not be able to afford to live in my borough, but I can surf the subway with the skill of a fish who grew up in the ocean.

My dad taught us how to stand feet slightly apart, knees imperceptibly bent, and to move with the bumps and jolts of the train rattling along track. He taught us the cred that comes with being able to stand in a crowded train without needing to hold on to anything. He taught us the joys of being in the first car and looking out the window with the same view as the driver. He taught us in which tunnels were the subway art (just after DeKalb Ave on the D as it heads to the Manhattan Bridge) or when you could see the Statue of Liberty (on the F train as it curves towards or away from Carroll Gardens). He taught us to memorize not just the subway map but also the system. To this day I not only know which car to be in, but which door, to be the first out and first up the stairs to move faster than the crunch of people. My mum, claustrophobic and hater of crowds, taught us that—to be always the first out the train up the stairs through the turnstiles up the second set of stairs and out onto the street. Our dad taught us how to be calm and prepared to lead from within.

A point of pride. When I first moved to Pittsburgh, my friends would still call me from New York to get directions. My nickname, GSP. I met my first love in the subway. A group of us were heading from the neighborhood we called the Neighborhood Divine, and I was given the task to coordinate with Alexis who had just moved back to the city and lived one stop south of us. By then we had cell phones and Erica handed me hers to coordinate with Alexis what time Alexis needed to leave her apartment to get to the 1/9 platform of the 96th Street Station so that she would catch the train we would be on. This was before apps like Station or even the digital signs with the time to next train. This was skill. We coordinated when to leave and where on the platform to stand. And when we pulled into 96th Street there we all were as we had said we would be, and she got on without us having to get off and nobody had to wait. And then, later that evening, smoking cigarettes outside the bar our friends were throwing a lesbian party at in the East Village, Alexis solved my biggest dilemma of the summer-I-had-to-move-to-Pittsburgh-for-PhD-school, and I didn't know how to drive. Just as she was right there when the subway doors had opened, she said, *I have a truck, I'll move you to Pittsburgh, I love Pittsburgh*. And then she did.

What is the connection between knowledge of the MTA Subway system and lesbian love? There is a choreography of movement that New Yorkers have as we navigate the underground network of tunnels. And there are codes of what is acceptable movement and what is not. My father taught us to use the poles as jungle gyms on empty weekend evenings. In high school, when I began commuting

on a daily basis, occasionally there would be a flasher or public masturbator, and in the stillness around there was a safety in knowing that everyone was aware and watching to make sure the boundary that hadn't quite yet been crossed wasn't. In high school I learned to say loudly do not touch my ass when someone tried to use the crowds as a cover for harassment. I learned the power of public shaming what someone would want private. Growing up knowing how to navigate what many see as dangerous chaos is a superpower for coming out and being out and remaining out.

One of the few times I was proposed to was on the subway. In the early mid-90s, I had a babysitting gig on a weekday evening after dinner, after rush hour. I would ride the back of the train where nobody else was so that I could smoke a cigarette—just to enjoy the freedom of smoking a cigarette where it was not allowed. For a few weeks, I would overlap with this brother who would be in the last car when I got on at Grand Army Plaza who was riding the last car to smoke his crack pipe in peace. For a brief moment we were friends, and although I didn't accept his proposal, it filled me with love and pride.

Part II: The Roots of Composition in Struggles for Open Admissions and Free Tuition

In *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition Literacies Studies*, Carmen Kynard provides a history of composition literacy studies by centering Black freedom struggles from slavery through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and the shift from investing in schools to investing in the prison industrial complex in the 1980s that continues through the present. Kynard centers the intimate relationship between freedom struggles and writing pedagogy at HBCUs as a key location for understanding our field's history. She devotes two chapters to a complex analysis of the influence of Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors & Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*, a book foundational to the field that developed inclusive writing pedagogy while at the same time created limiting and limited representations of what literacy can and should be for students who resist the norms of Standard American English. Shaughnessy wrote *Errors & Expectations* while she was directing the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) program at City College during the 1960s and 1970s. Kynard argues the importance of contextualizing Shaughnessy's *Errors & Expectations* and CUNY in the 1960s and 1970s within the radical traditions *Vernacular Insurrections* lays out as part of "a reconceptualization of who and what shaped the field" (221).

Kynard explains: "There is little evidence in our current mainstream historiography of basic writing in the 1970s that the students were provided with a space where writing and its form could take on racial justice in the way that the *content and style* of Du Bois's writings and the writings of BAM writers did" (232). The recent publications of *LOST & FOUND: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative* from archives of four US third world feminist poets teaching in the SEEK program during Shaughnessy's tenure as director allow us to see that the basic writing students in the SEEK program were "provided with a space where writing and its forms could take on racial justice in . . . *content and style*" (232). The recent *Lost & Found* publications provide ample evidence that indeed students

in the 1970s had the space to develop writing practices within the university to tackle racial justice on the levels of *content and style* as part of the fights for free tuition and open admissions. These publications enable an important extension of Kynard's project where the writings of the radical teachers on the ground can replace the monolith of Shaughnessy's *Errors & Expectations* for understanding the influence of SEEK for literacy studies. How was this important part of our history lost and at what and whose cost? We must turn greater attention to the foundational influence US third world feminists have had in shaping literacy studies in the context of fights for free tuition and open admission. To do otherwise may dilute the transformative possibilities toward which our pedagogy and scholarship reaches.

In a quiet footnote in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval argues the academic erasure of the US third world feminists belies the continued transformative power of their work. She writes:

The mystery of the academic erasure of U.S. third world feminism is a disappearing trick. Its exemption from academic canon short-circuits knowledge but secures the acquittal of a "third," feminist "force" about which Derrida suggested "it should not be named." Not named, he hoped, in order that what is performative and mobile never be set into any place: freedom resides, thus, everywhere. It is out of this terrain that US third world feminism calls up new kinds of people, those with skills to rise out of citizenship to agency: countrypeople of a new territory. For these countrypeople-warriors who are no longer "US third world feminist," the game is beginning again, new names, new players. (195, note 22)

Sandoval writes the academic erasure of her countrypeople as magic. In a disappearing trick, something is there but then it's not, or is perceived as not there, but is actually still there just beyond perception—the perception of movement outwits the limits of knowledge, and movement is free. The influence of third world feminism is on our streets and in our communities, our arts, our politics, our friendships and loves, our nutrition and health, and in our classrooms, our syllabi, our assignments, and our fields including composition and rhetoric. Sandoval casts their erasure as a positive. However, in the field of composition and rhetoric, their invisibility may be doing more harm than good. The emergence of literacy narratives as a best practice in first-year writing (FYW) pedagogy is one possible site for remediating knowledge by historicizing literacy narratives within the coalition building by feminists within and beyond academia in the second half of the 20th century United States. To do so may help us approach literacy narratives without the binding constraints of genre, as I resisted genre conventions in the above literacy narrative. I drew on practices of writing as an act of survival, which I learned to do through US third world feminist praxis by writing myself into the world and through it.

For Sandoval there is no mystery. She locates the academic erasure of US third world feminism in feminist scholarship of the 1980s that marginalized the theoretical work of feminists of color as "mere 'description'" or as "the special force of poetry" (47). In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Sandoval draws direct correlations amongst the work of writers like Franz Fanon, Frederic Jameson, and Roland Barthes with the praxis of US third world feminism as mapped in publications including *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Sisterhood Is Powerful* and by authors including Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Nellie Wong, and Paula Gunn Allen. Sandoval makes visible a web of connections that

“summons a new subject capable of love, hope, and transformative resistance” (Davis viii).

In the twenty years since the publication of *Methodology of the Oppressed*, this dynamic cohort of thinkers, writers, and friends have gained more academic visibility. Most notably the 2017 National Women’s Studies Association’s annual conference was dedicated to a revisiting of the ideas, actions, and women associated with the Combahee River Collective Statement. However, in composition and rhetoric the influence of this dynamic cohort is felt in many places while still being largely invisible. I have a particular worry that the erasure may be doing more damage than good here. Eric Darnell Pritchard’s essay “Like signposts on the road’: The Function of Literacy in Constructing Black Queer Ancestors” discusses the importance of us knowing our Black queer ancestors in terms of finding our own spaces in the academy. Pritchard explains the “historical erasure is a deterrent to the full opportunities for growth, affirmation, and community made possible through literacy practices aimed at achieving rootedness” (31). When we present the ideas and practice of US third world feminism without reading and teaching their texts, we promote a process of who we see and who sees themselves as scholar. This process maintains a whiteness of a field that most of us do not even desire to remain white, even if many of us have not found the bravery to fully resist and transform.

Like Kynard argues in *Vernacular Insurrections*, Patricia Laurence similarly suggests damage to our field due to the erasure of the identity of third world feminists while we practice and present their ideas. Shaughnessy’s widely influential study of basic writing, *Errors and Expectations*, has become metonymic shorthand for the dynamic local of City College in the 1960s and 1970s, “belying the ‘dialogical’ nature of educational movements and the ‘rich’ description of people, programs, institutions, and politics” (19). Damage is done when we lose sight of how university administration dictates what college writing is, how the social and political moment creates different possibilities for student consciousness, and how a diverse polyphonic faculty engaged in social justice education with their students shaped the direction of writing pedagogy and university policy. While Laurence does not name the faculty, the *Lost & Found* publications establish roots of composition and rhetoric in the work of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich, among other poets teaching composition at CUNY during struggles for open admissions and free tuition.

Lost & Found publishes selections from the archives of poets to “illuminate understudied aspects of literary, cultural, and political history” (“About Lost & Found”). In 2013, the series published “*What We Are Part Of*” *Teaching At CUNY: 1968-1974*, the first of four publications focused on the archives of a community of poets teaching primarily in the SEEK program at City College during a time of sweeping change as higher education attempted to respond to the pressing policies of the Civil Rights Movement. The energy emerging from the integrationist efforts of City College in Harlem, a mecca of Black and Puerto Rican families, transformed writing pedagogy as we knew it and became “a reciprocal incubator for student and faculty radicalization” (Reed 48). Under a cohort of teachers including Aijaz Ahmad, Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Christian, Addison Gayle, David Henderson, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Raymond Patterson, Adrienne Rich, and Mina Shaughnessy, the writing classroom became a place of two-way learning for teachers to learn from students as much as students learn from the teachers: central to this shift was the teacher’s perspective of per students. Students were not seen as the problem; the problem was an educational system set up to

encourage failure.

To lay a groundwork of student success, the writing classroom has to become a place where students and teachers together can undo the damage of racist education. Shaughnessy abstracted from the work happening in the SEEK program and Open Admissions policies in *Errors and Expectations* to offer what we now accept as the commonplace of student-centered teaching (Laurence; kaufman; Kynard; Savonick). At the time of writing there are publications from the archives of four of the poets who taught writing during the first years of the SEEK program. In typical *Lost & Found* style, each publication is edited collaboratively by a team of scholars teaching and researching at CUNY and are book-ended by editorial essays and biographies that present the archives in the larger contexts of the poets' lives and worlds as well as pointing to previously published texts on their teaching at CUNY. Through these four publications, "we can begin to reconstruct a defining moment in the relationships between the work of poets and writings and the teaching of writing" (kaufman 1) and remediate those scholarship practices that continue their "exemption from academic canon" to better wield their power as a third force within our disciplines and classrooms.

The moves used in the 1980s to create the conditions of academic erasure are still at play here in the 21st century within texts that are useful for doing anti-racist queer pedagogy in ways that continue to uphold the center (and much of the margins even) as straight and white. The segregation within composition and rhetoric continues to serve the hegemony of white supremacy. It may be useful to see these moves at play in contemporary contexts that maintain processes of white supremacy even in projects that can be used to dismantle it. As Sandoval explains, these moves "are called on to tempt, inhabit, and shape not only the most obedient and deserving citizen-subject, but also the most rebellious agent of social change" (119).

Joseph Harris' widely taught *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* is a wonderful example of the invisible force of US third world feminism in composition studies. The central premise of Harris' book is that there is an intimate relationship between words and action, and it offers the reader and writer a set of moves to analyze other writers' projects and develop their own projects in conversation with other writers. As Harris explains:

A project is something that a writer is working on—and that a text can only imperfectly realize. (Of course, any text you write will also hint at possibilities of meaning you had not considered, imply or suggest things you had not planned. A text always says both less and more than its writer intends). To define the project of a writer is thus to push beyond his text, to hazard a view about not only what someone has said but also what he was trying to accomplish by saying it. (18)

Harris presents a project as something writers are working on in a text but also as something they are working on in their own lives beyond the text. This approach to writing resonates with Audre Lorde's explanation of writing in the canonical essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." Lorde argues, "Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors" (39). As a pedagogical tool in FYW classrooms where many students have been trained to turn off imagination and treat essay writing as a process of filling in a predetermined form, project-based reading and writing demands

personal engagement. Harris circumvents the contributions of feminists of color who developed a praxis of writing as action and looks to J. L. Austin's work on the performative sentence, particularly "expositive verbs," as the influence to his approach to reading and writing as actions for developing subjectivity allowing US third world feminism the power of a third force (4).

Harris, a composition scholar committed to student engagement, presents a white-washed picture of the field, a practice that may be doing more harm than good in composition and rhetoric. It's not really a problem in most of his book because he is offering abstraction. However, he ends his chapter on countering with a note on civility, arguing for performances of humility and grace when exploring where a reader's ideas diverge from the writer's; he argues for "the art of honest yet civil disagreement" (68). There is a lot to admire in a rhetoric of kindness, but Harris doesn't account for the power and need of anger as a tool for writing that breaks the chains of oppression. When we contextualize Harris' project in the debates that emerged from the specific historical and geographical moment at CUNY where students literally burned a building, we may see the need to expand Harris' art to include Lorde's discussion of how to use anger and how to assess and respond to appropriately directed anger. For Lorde, "anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth" ("Uses of Anger" 131). It is a source of mutual empowerment and a process that engenders self-scrutiny and examination of structures of oppression to survive and transform them. Anger, in the hands of Lorde, is a literacy that enables an exploration of power dynamics between self and others and is an essential process for Black women to navigate their specific challenges in academia. As Lorde explains, "Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters" (129). The history provided by the *Lost & Found* publications shows that our lesbian ancestors are also our composition-rhetoric ancestors. The respective praxes share an originary locale: CUNY City College in the 1960s and 1970s. The radical friendships of a cohort of poet-scholars teaching at CUNY are among the foundations of US third world feminism, *and* that same conversation manifested some of our commonplaces in composition and rhetoric including student-centered teaching and teaching literacy as a practice of self-empowerment that can create systemic change. The processes that Lorde describes as anger are the same processes that composition and rhetoric calls literacy.

If the mystery of the academic erasure of US third world feminism is a disappearing trick, we see a recent manifestation of the act in Jessica Restaino's beautiful and moving book *Surrender: Feminist Rhetoric and Ethics in Love and Illness*, winner of the 2020 CCCC Outstanding Book Award. Restaino develops a methodology for performing the role of the rhetorician as listener and scribe rather than persuader as she uses queer theory and feminism to build trans-disciplinary coalition amongst the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Her "impulse . . . is to . . . claim our mobility, our essential capacity for seepage and spilling over" (73). Restaino draws on the work of psychologist Jessica Benjamin, whose work helps Restaino understand her collaboration with her dear friend Sue Lundy Maute as Maute lived with and died from stage four breast cancer. Restaino animates rhetorical performance as an act of surrender that allows for a third space where coalition building is possible.

In the section where Restaino acknowledges her influences to her own approach, she explains,

“This is not, however, a study of breast cancer narratives, though such work is emergent and I think compelling in rhetorical studies; Sue’s ‘breast cancer story’ is not mine to tell in any succinct or comprehensive way” (35). Then, in a footnote, Audre Lorde’s feminist exploration of cancer, capitalism, friendship, self-conscious living, and language justice disappears with a sleight of hand:

There is however an extensive body of such cancer narratives, including Audre Lorde’s *Cancer Journals* and many others; also of note is emerging scholarship on breast cancer narratives as they unfold online. See especially Beemer, “From the Margins of Healthcare.” (162, note 10)

Restaino marginalizes *The Cancer Journals* by simplifying its genre to cancer narrative in a sentence where she further contains narrative as an object of study rather than story as an essential creative force in human reality (Powell 429, n1). Yes, *The Cancer Journals* uses narrative, but the codex is generically hybrid, as in many feminist publications, and includes Lorde’s 1977 Modern Language Association speech, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” selections from private journals, poems, and the polemic “Breast Cancer: Power Vs. Prosthesis.” The 1997 special edition adds a multimodal final section called “Remembering Audre” that includes six photographs by photographer Jean Weisinger and twelve tributes. Lorde’s investigation into the role of lesbian friendship while living with breast cancer and the way the special edition diffracts the gaze to her friends still living may have created the space for Restaino’s project and be fertile ground for future studies of feminist rhetoric and ethics in love and illness committed to anti-racist coalition building.

What prevents Restaino engaging Lorde as ancestor and theorist? Restaino’s quiet dismissal of Lorde’s project reanimates the move, which Sandoval identifies as the move to categorize poetry as mere description, that helped spur the initial erasure of US third world feminist texts from our canons. Restaino positions Lorde’s book outside of her conversation because it is narrative and what Restaino is doing is feminist rhetoric. However, in that assertion Restaino relies on “boundary lines designed to demarcate ‘discipline’” in ways that “undermine the roots of . . . rhetoric-composition, as inherently hybridized, interdisciplinary work,” the very roots her book desires to animate (73). The problem may lie in “the pervasive operative presumption that general theory or conceptual reflection is formulated elsewhere than in African Diasporic (American) studies, and that it is only applied here” (Chandler, qtd. in Weheliye 114). Too often, third world culture is still seen as a problem to solve rather than the keeper of our solutions.

In addition to the role hegemonic feminism has in framing the work of feminists of color as description, the field of composition and rhetoric has largely ignored the contributions of US third world feminism in shaping approaches to literacy narratives. The emerging pedagogies about and for teaching literacy narratives in FYW classrooms is one possible location for remediating the damage of the academic erasure. Julie Lindquist and Bump Halbritter in their inspiring essay on teaching literacy narratives in FYW gesture to this history as a possible remedy for the challenges of teaching and writing literacy narratives. They write: “We wonder: how has it taken us so long to shift the blame to the subject *as taught*? The answer to this question, we suspect, is a complicated one, having to do with disciplinary histories and formations, values and aspirations, commonplaces of theory and practice. That is a robust and necessary direction for future inquiry” (431). Even as Lindquist

and Halbritter acknowledge there may be dire consequences to the way our histories have been disciplined, in placing this work in the future, they render invisible projects like Kynard's that have already laid out traditions that challenge the commonplace of centering white thought in geographies gripped by histories of colonial white supremacy, genocide, and racial slavery. I wonder what our FYW commonplaces would be if white scholars studied Black tradition as we stop teaching white thought as if it existed outside of a conversation with multiple traditions.

To resist teaching process as genre, Lindquist and Halbritter developed a syllabus where a literacy narrative taught at the beginning of the semester is returned to as part of a final reflective essay. They assert the particularity of their approach and encourage additional strategies.

At the public university in northern New Jersey where I teach, we have begun teaching literacy narratives as the first essay in our FYW sequence to address an increase in W/D/F grades. The assignment is meant to provide greater flexibility in writing style and provide students an opportunity to write about a topic about which they are already knowledgeable: themselves. The assignment that we offer to our students undermines that potential flexibility by establishing genre conventions of fiction. The assignment explains a successful literacy narrative has:

- A well-told story: conflict or crisis, resolution, suspense.
- Vivid detail: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, descriptions of places and people.
- Significance: Even though this narrative is about you, it must have a controlling central claim and purpose.

To achieve these goals the assignment suggests focusing on a single “brief, specific moment” whose significance should be obvious. There are more guidelines, criteria, and instructions packed into three single-spaced pages that encourage vivid verbs and meaningful dialogue, among other things. When I was invited to use our assignment to write a narrative (included above) as part of our unpaid, end-of-the-academic-year programmatic work, I decided to take the NYC subway system as my literacy. As I began writing, I immediately felt weighed down by the guidelines to approach story as generic fiction.

I wanted to enjoy the process of writing the literacy narrative. To do that I ignored many aspects of the assignment. Most notably, instead of elaborating a single moment, I move from brief moment to brief moment and back and forth in time in a style common to contemporary poetry. I included little dialogue and initially did not worry about significance. In other words, I hit a flow and went with it—which is what I encourage my students to do when they write their essays. At first, my storytelling ended with moving to Pittsburgh, but the essay felt unfinished. I returned to the assignment prompt and realized I had left out significance. I took time to pause and reread what I had written and contemplate the significance and arrived at the question: “What is the connection between knowledge of the MTA Subway system and lesbian love?” From there the flow continued as I began to understand the significance of the narrative is that it performs what is often seen as a problem in the FYW classroom, the oppositional black urban imagination, as a lesbian superpower—a realization I came to by engaging narrative writing as a process of freedom, as I have been learning to do with my students. I write the assignments and as they tell me where they feel confined by the assignment, I change the assignment or encourage them to break the rules. For instance, instead of

teaching narrative as a genre in FYW classes, I teach personal narrative as a process of “describing a memory or set of memories inside our own heads” and give students the freedom to choose what type of styles they want to try out, including an option to create their own (Patterson). To teach writing as a process of freedom, I surrender to my understanding of oppositional poetics as articulated by Erica Hunt. The goal of poetry is not to uphold genre convention but rather to use writing as a tool to break with genre convention, which also teaches us the skills to break with social norms that work to oppress us—our resistance is essential to our survival (Hunt 199).

The same goes for the classroom. The power dynamics of the classroom are only hierarchical in so much as our contracts demand. Particularly in the first-year writing classroom where many students have not yet been disciplined in academic norms, the teaching of writing becomes an opportunity for two-way learning, an exchange of power between student and teacher around difference that does not need to be performed solely in hierarchical ways. The moves that convention would have us think of as student error are actually student resistance to genre and standardization and are a product of freely engaging language’s dynamism. As a teacher, I teach difference from academic expectations as a choice with attendant joys, challenges, and even consequences. As writers and thinkers, student “error” becomes possibility for teachers to learn ways of using language that have not been effectively disciplined. By teachers changing in the confrontation with difference, much the way Bambara, Jordan, Lorde, and Rich did and teach us to do (as further elaborated below in Part III), we can learn from our students the places where our pedagogy oppresses and what needs to change to foster “a praxis that . . . enable[s] us to break free of the epistemological and political stranglehold of late-capitalist antinomies” (Foley 424). To center third world feminism, rather than to treat it as a feature or to tokenize it—as is often the case in much dominant discourse—is a way of breaking convention and shifting paradigms.

Part III: A Poetics against Standardizing Literacy Narratives

A Poetics

Poetry is the most personal language of experience.

It is how we name what happens to us. It is how we name ourselves. It is how we name our dreams so that others will join in our dreaming. It’s how we name what terrified, and how we exorcise that terror. (Jordan 40)

I teach myself in outline. (Lorde 17)

Article 1. Methodology

*tropicalities. This would be the criticism of desire:
sowing not reaping.*

—Charles Bernstein

Here is a poetics, a collection of moves growing like wildflowers in our field. I used a simple process to create the outline below. I actively read through the four publications from the archives of Toni

Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich, respectively. I initially identified four moves that they had in common: two-way learning; “I” and “we”/individual to community; writing tools/technology; SRTOL. I made a table in a word processing software program and filled in the categories with marginalia and direct quotations from active reading notes. When notes did not fit into any of the initial four moves, I added new categories with an organic stopping point of eleven for the purposes of this essay. I then created the outline below from the table. To elaborate each move, I selected data from the published archives using the table and from contemporary examples from teaching and research using memory.

Data is selected and organized for resonance. Direct quotations are styled in block format without signal phrases. The outline uses standards of universal design to promote accessibility. I hope we find the outline useful for historicizing and futuring efforts to animate our classrooms as sites for continuing our freedom struggles.

Article II. An Outline of Moves to Transform Heteronormative White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy and Affirm Third World Paradigms Are Enough Leverage to Build Community and Perform Coalition Building Within and Beyond Writing Classrooms

Section II.01. Two-way Learning

The result of a pedagogical structure that encourages reciprocal transformation in the encounter with difference.

(A) Definition

It was, then, a course with few limits, no specific end, personal, often agonizing—without a doubt the most difficult kind of course to ‘teach’ for there can be no ‘control’ in the usual pedagogic sense, and without a doubt the most worthwhile kind of educational adventure for it lends itself so easily to two-way learning. (Bambara, “Part II” 2)

(B) Examples of two-way learning:

(1) *Teacher changing readings in response to student feedback:*

But after a long period of silence, one student said, “I don’t know about the others, but I’m tired of living through fiction.” The vigorous nods that accompanied his remark and a phone call I got that night from a student who had absented himself from a few classes who said “identifying with heroes in books is like masturbating” made me take a good look at my previous reading lists and the notes I’ve kept over the years. And I do not exaggerate the case by saying that many a student becomes quickly impatient if not guilty with living vicariously in these times that demand vital and total participation. The wary students find sanctuary in literature; the alert student prefers to respond to writing produced by his fellow classmates. (Bambara, “Part II” 4)

(2) *Student writing essay in response to assignment prompt and final portfolio conference:*

I recently came across an article from the San Francisco weekly called “10 Reasons You Should Come Out of the Closet” by Kate Cogner. The 9th reason really caught my attention; it was titled “The Baby Gays Need You.” I am very surprised that it

isn't a very well known quote because it has so much meaning behind it and I am glad I came across it. Cogner goes on to explain her experience and the first time she saw a lesbian couple; "The first time I ever saw a lesbian couple, I was standing in the hallway on my first day of high school. By that time, I had already experienced so much bullying that I was sure there were no proudly out queer people anywhere on earth (I didn't grow up in San Francisco, obviously). It was like seeing not one unicorn, but two insanely pretty lady unicorns who happened to be snuggling and smitten with each other. It was shocking and life-changing." This quote goes to show how that was a turning point for her because she was able to see that there were queer people out in the open who did not care what others thought about them and they were happy! Many people are very lucky to have that turning point occur in their lives, where they come to a sense of realization of themselves and see that it is okay to be who you are and to love who you love. Unfortunately, I was not exposed to the queer community while I was growing up. I was basically set up to figure it out for myself because there were no openly gay people in my small town. However, although I went through this process the hard way, I still learned and I grew as a person and I am forever grateful for that. I went through the tough process of coming out where it wasn't accepted so that one day, *I* could be someone's "unicorn", *I* could be that person's role model and *I* could change their life for the better and show that them that it is absolutely acceptable to be gay no matter what others may think or believe. (Sierra 4-5)

(3) *Teacher writing essay in response to student essay:*

There is a choreography of movement that New Yorkers have as we navigate the underground network of tunnels. And there are codes of what is acceptable movement and what is not. My father taught us to use the poles as jungle gyms on empty weekend evenings. In high school when I began commuting on a daily basis occasionally there would be a flasher or public masturbator and in the stillness around there was a safety of the knowledge everyone was aware and watching to make sure the boundary that hadn't quite yet been crossed wasn't. In high school I learned to say loudly *do not touch my ass* when men tried to use the crowds as a cover for harassment. I learned the power of public shaming what someone would want private. Growing up knowing how to navigate what the rest of the world sees as dangerous chaos taught and continues to teach me to come out and be out and remain out.

(4) *Dialogic meaning-making with difficult readings*

[L]et me suggest that you offer students whatever books seem urgently relevant to you—for yourself. I do not think it is infinitely preferable to have a student declare that a book is "too hard," than for any of us to presume he is "too young" . . . Childhood is no longer innocent; children are baffled to the point of drug-using desperation. We have already blundered into 1984 and *Brave New World*. Give them

yourselves; what you worry about, what you believe; give them books you are reading, and tell them why you are reading these books. (Jordan 41)

- a) Urgently relevant turn of the 21st Century readings from Patterson FYW syllabi, MSU 2013-2020
- Durielle E. Harris, *Drag* (Elixir Press, 2003); Erica Hunt, “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics” (Roof Books, 1990); Steven Craig Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the History of America’s Troubled Universities* (Bloomsbury Press, 2013); Ann Mantil, Anne G. Perkins, and Stephanie Aberger, “The Challenge of High-Poverty Schools: How Feasible Is Socioeconomic School Integration?” (The Century Foundation Press, 2012); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Duke UP, 2003); Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, *Democracy Now!* (1996-present); Joseph Harris, *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (Utah State UP, 2017); Sheila Maldonado, *One Bedroom Solo* (Fly by Night Press, 2011); Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” (Crossing Press, 2007); Rachel Levitsky, *The Story of My Accident Is Ours* (Futurepoem Books, 2013); Dunia Fernandez, “A Conversation of ‘Who Said It Best? The Scientists or the Artists’: On Family and Friends as Happiness” (College Writing I, 2015); Mendi+Keith Obadike *Four Electric Ghosts* (1913 Press, 2011); Sheryl Oring, *Activating Democracy: The “I Wish to Say” Project* (Intellect, 2016); Chloë Bass, “The Question: The Door to What We Most Want to Know” (Intellect, 2016); Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton UP, 2002); June Jordan, *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood* (Basic Civitas 2001); Zahra Patterson, *Chronology*, (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018); Naomi Kuo, *Flushing Art Tours #1* (2019); Lena Herzog, *Last Whispers: An Immersive Oratorio* (Peak Performance, 2019); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Vintage Books, 1993); Tisa Bryant, *Unexplained Presence* (Leon Works, 2006); Tracie Morris, *Who Do With Words* (Chax Press, 2018); Natasha Lyonne, Leslye Headland, and Amy Poehler, *Russian Doll* (Netflix, 2018); Fakhair Spence, “[The last writing of me]” (Wesleyan UP, 2016); Valentina Di Liscia, “Shellyne Rodriguez’s Drawings Expand the Definition of ‘Essential Workers’” (Hyperallergic, 2020).

(5) *Teacher transforms administration*

The teacher therefore who is searching for a tightly and fully structured writing program will not find it here. This book is concerned with the orientations and perceptions of teachers in relation to a specific population of student writers. It assumes that programs are not the answers to the learning problems of students but that teachers are and that, indeed, good teachers create good programs, that the best programs are developed *in situ*, in response to the needs of individual student

populations and as reflections of the particular histories and resources of individual colleges. (Shaughnessy 390-91)

(6) *K-12 students transform administration*

It might be helpful to invite 100 children, from the local elementary schools, to come to an assortment of College classes, for one week. Then, perhaps, the participants of the ritual, (politicians, students, faculty, administrators) could assemble themselves, and listen to the children. Let them speak to the implication of the fourth demand. They are the implications. (Jordan 50)

Section II.02. “I” and “We”/ Individual to Community

At an event at the Brooklyn Museum, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon explains the way songs operated during the marches of the Civil Rights Movement. Gathering for the march we would sing “This Little Light of Mine” as a way to check in and take care of the self. As we start out on the march we would sing “We Shall Overcome.” We take care of the self to prepare for the challenges of collective action.

(A) Definition

(1) *Collective liberation*

These questions do not prompt the kind of individualism that serves “the interest of capitalist profit system” but rather bring people closer to collective liberation. (Atkins and Brown 3)

(2) *Progression*

No system of values has worth unless it aims to make us better than we are. What do I mean by better? By better I mean for each of us—more who we are. That we develop then from I -> you -> us. (Lorde 34)

(3) *Poetry*

[P]olitical activism and writing generate related forms of power and... poetry hinges on a delicate and necessary relationship between an “I” and a “we.” (Shalev 1)

(B) Sample Assignment

In your daily living

Give 3 examples of actual ways in which you yourself can function to positively counteract racism

Be Specific (Lorde 31)

(C) Importance of bonds

In the fragmented, compartmentalized, often depersonalizing environs of City College, it’s possible a long-term approach to the Writing Program would by its very nature become a source of orientation and personal strength for the student. (Rich, “Part I” 32)

Section II.03. Dissolve Boundaries as a Practice of Freedom Essential to Survival: Contemporary Third World Life Studies

(A) Classrooms open portals

- c) Embodied and experiential knowledge
The Center would tap the resources in our community and use as instructors those grandmothers, those on the corner hardheads, those students, those instructors, whoever happens to have the knowledge and expertise we desire, regardless of the number of or absence of degrees, publications, titles, honors. (Bambara, “Part II” 21)
- d) Network communications
The Center could begin then, to set up a network of communications so that one person desiring to set up a course in Caribbean cookery, let’s say, could be put in touch with chefs, caterers, linguists, anthropologists, etc. (Bambara, “Part II” 22)
- e) Urgently Relevant Text (URText)
Tisa Bryant, Miranda Mellis, and Kate Schatz, *Encyclopedia Vol. 1 A-E*; *Encyclopedia Vol. 2 F-K*; and Tisa Bryant, Miranda Mellis, and Katie Aymar, *Encyclopedia Vol. 3: L-Z*.

(3) *Administration*

- a) Accommodations
[W]hen, how, why, or in what way the universities would have to shift their focus to accommodate a mass studentry. (Bambara, “Part II” 17)
- b) Community control
We must make ourselves into a community machine that will eliminate and throw out their political machinery.
What we have to do, right now, is to create community machines that will collect our garbage, control our schools, and patrol our streets for our safety and not our persecution. (Jordan 33)
- c) Student control
Take it over: Don’t drop out. Change it. Let us insist that Life Studies, that Black Studies, that Urban Studies become the central parts of the curriculum, Right now. (Jordan 34)

(4) *Content*

- b) Lesbian voices
[Shifting the center through contemporary texts] (Atkins and Brown 9)
- c) Our realities
The people in the class and their experiences will be the basic material of the course . . . In writing, we will be trying to define the actual experiences we ourselves are having, and to make others more aware of our reality as we perceive it. (Rich, “Part II” 22)
- d) The melting pot myth
[A]n elective that will investigate the melting pot myth—in an attempt to find out what effect antagonist national, ethnic, and racial groups have on

the . . . country. (Bambara, “Part II” 28)

e) Language as social control

“In school we do not emphasize the real function of language in our lives: how it operates in courts, in hospitals, in schools, in the media, how it operates to perpetuate a society, maintain a social order, to reflect biases, to transmit basic values.” (Bambara, qtd. in Lavan and Reed 9)

f) Whole wide world of print

I had an indiscriminate appetite for print: bubble gum wrappers, comic books, other people’s post cards. (Bambara, “Part I” 13)

g) Student and community writing

Perhaps librarians could collaborate with teachers or, on an older level, with community leaders toward the establishing of a special section reserved for student and community writings. (Jordan 38)

h) The now

[R]e-constructing a teaching practice that saw the classroom as a collectively composed, gradually crafted commentary on the now. (Atkins and Brown 14)

i) Life Studies

I hope you will insist that your studies shall become Life Studies: Black Studies. Urban Studies. Environmental Studies . . . we who poison ourselves simply by breathing the air, and we who swallow soap and worms, and worse than that, when we drink a glass of water . . . Where are the central, required courses that will teach us how to design and govern cities so that the cities will function as great temples of life that welcome us inside[,] that welcomes our lives? Where are the central required courses that teach us how to destroy the enemy, urban situation that threatens all life now dwelling inside our city walls? (Jordan 32)

(C) We Are Part of Nationwide Cultural Revolution

(1) *Multicultural solidarity*

For a minute, there, mid 1950s, there was multicultural solidarity in community-based action groups . . . (Bambara, “Part I” 54)

(2) *Coalition building is resistance*

That’s been the directive since Cortez and from Cortez through COINTELPRO and up to this minute—keep these people under siege—no coalitions. (Bambara, “Part I” 55)

(3) *International locations*

The traditional meaning of power is inhuman. It is, at all times, intrinsically opposed at least to some human life—whether it is opposed to human life in Birmingham, or in Ocean Hill, or in Harlem, or in Detroit, or in Watts, or in Memphis, or in Augusta, or in Jackson, Mississippi, or in Cambodia, or in Vietnam. —It—the old, abusive

American power is opposed to human life. (Jordan 33)

Section II. 04. Writing Tools/Technology

(A) Pens and paper

(1) *Joy of manual labor*

[description of pens] (Bambara, "Part I" 41)

(2) *Uniformity*

Please use 8 1/2 x 11" ringed-notebook paper for all your work. (Rich, "Part II" 22)

(3) *Choice*

I recall from years of teaching Freshman English that students did noticeably better work once they found tools that suited them . . . I never demanded uniformity of the use-only-this-paper-and-fold-this-way-with-your-name blah blah variety. (Bambara, "Part I" 23)

(4) *Experiment*

[F]ind materials that please and provoke and . . . experiment with new ones. (Bambara, "Part I" 25)

(B) Words

Words are the names of history, minute by minute. (Jordan 44)

(C) Library

(1) *Tool for naming*

I think of the library as a sanctuary from the spectacle, from the alienation, from the unnamed, and the seeming unnameable. (Jordan 39)

(2) *Tool for transforming*

The library has to compete with the movies. Words will have to win that competition. Or, at least, words will have to win their way right up onto the screen, under the imagery of our shown and spreading chaos. Libraries, books, sentences, words will have to supply the subtitles that yield relief, the captions that promise understanding, regardless of what it is we see, *per force*. (Jordan 38)

(D) Writing as a tool

(1) *Rhetorical analysis*

[T]ools which will serve you in all your college courses: the skill to describe, summarize, analyze, support an idea with concrete examples, criticize and evaluate what you read, etc. [rhetorical analysis] (Rich, "Part II" 21)

(2) *Inspire change*

The SEEK classroom became a place where multiple and nonstandard literacies were investigated and respected, and where writing became a tool used to inspire change instead of a skill added to the roster of things students were too often told they "lacked." (kaufman 3)

(E) URText

Mendi+Keith Obadike "American Cypher: Stereo Helix for Sally Hemmings." The sounds

in this work are from a 200 year old bell owned by Sally Hemings and field recording from Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. (Obadike)

Section II.05. Students' Rights to Their Own Language

(A) A writer teaches you how to read them

No inflections were added, nor any idiomatic usage "corrected." From the habitual and building fluency of their work, the children, spontaneously, became concerned about punctuation, stanzas, paragraphs, and form, generally. Questions about these technicalities were pursued by the children because they wanted to make sure that what they said could not be mistaken, by anybody. (Jordan 29)

(B) URText

Maria Montaperto "Riding the Wave of 'Students' Right to Their Own Language:' A 2024 Vision." Making Waves, Conference on College Composition & Communication, March 2009, San Francisco, CA.

Section II.06. Translingualism and Language Justice

It is not only to refine the written equivalent of the oral expression . . . It is also to duplicate on the page what ritual, magic, incantation, and getting happy to do the "normal" state of consciousness. (Bambara, "Part I" 46)

(A) Translingualism

(1) *Representing difference*

The challenge is language. How to avoid lapsing into translationese, parataxis, faux naïf utterances, or any other kind of artificial syntax that so many writers adopt when moving outside of their immediate, native culture. (Bambara, "Part I" 44)

a) Solutions

i) Limit dialogue

[H]aving less than four lines of actual dialogue, and those are overhears interrupted by the wind. (Bambara, "Part I" 44)

ii) Practice

The development of a pitch perfect ear is one of the tasks I assign myself now as new demands of language fluency strike me with an urgency . . . (Bambara, "Part I" 40)

iii) Music

[strategy: listen to music from region] (Bambara, "Part I" 45)

iv) Study

[strategy:] pay more studious attention to language, rather than the abandonment of African-American experience particularity in favor of some fraudulent "universality." (Bambara, "Part I" 44)

v) Ride the subway

[Black translanguaging] (Bambara, “Part I” 45)

(A) Language Justice

(1) *Grammar*

[amazing articulation of how grammar shapes consciousness/worldview] (Bambara, “Part I” 47)

(2) *Magic*

In discussing mystic experiences, psychic awareness, profound spiritual states, for example, we, of course, sound like loons. It is difficult to validate an experience sounding like a loon. No accident. A civilization whose agenda has always been world domination can certainly not afford to have its subjects formulating a technology for living that cannot be State controlled, cannot have subjects calling upon any power that supersedes the state’s. (Bambara, “Part I” 47-48)

(B) Two-way Learning

What exists in the language already that can encourage its users to rise above its limits, freeing us up to perceive in new, and I’m certain, more valid, balanced, harmonizing ways? (Bambara, “Part I” 48)

(C) URText

Zahra Patterson, *Chronology* (Ugly Duckling Presse 2018)

Section II.07. “Confrontation Teaching” and Warrior Pedagogy and Writing

(A) Confrontation teaching

(1) *Bored*

Why bored? Some of us are afraid (Lorde 28)

(2) *Hiding*

The aim of my stumble and error approach, then, is to make the classroom unsafe, to bomb the hiding student out of his corner, to blast the insulating walls down . . . (Bambara, “Part II” 11)

(3) *Cool*

One, we have been conditioned to turn off, short out, be cool; two, we have been often pushed to make something from nothing. (Bambara, “Part II” 27)

(4) *Male privilege*

If this sounds shocking, remember that the loyalties of most male teachers are finally to continuing a system of male privilege and to leaving unquestioned a male tradition in literature. (Rich, “Part II” 32)

(B) Warrior Writing

(1) *Transformation and renewal*

[T]he basic givens from which I proceed. One, we are at war. Two, the natural response to oppression is resistance. Three, the natural response to stress and crisis is not breakdown and capitulation, but transformation and renewal. [resilience] (Bambara, “Part I” 36)

(2) *Those who dare*

One has to have or just flat out take permission to be an artist in society that marginalizes, trivializes, and commoditizes (wha?) creative effort . . . This society has rewards for those who demonstrate skills in nimble avoidance of uncomfortable realities that threaten the bogus peace, but no mercy for those who dare penetrate the social garments and speak out on the emperor's clothes. (Bambara, "Part I" 30)

(3) *Desperado*

The combination makes for a peculiar sort of desperado writing some times. Desperado in the Webster sense of outlaw. In the Roget sense of gambler. In the Unamuno sense of deep despair and high hopes. (Bambara, "Part I" 34)

(C) *Warrior Pedagogy*

To obtain a relevant, real education, we shall have to either topple the university or set up our own. (Bambara, "Part II" 18)

Section II.08. Anti-Racist and Good Teaching in Response to Racist Administration

(A) *Good teaching is anti-racist*

(1) *Empowers students*

[A] good teacher provokes rather than assuages, raises questions rather than provides answers, allows the students to discover techniques rather than teaches them, and equips the students with skills so that he can sever ties with the teacher quickly and teach himself. (Bambara, "Part II" 10)

(2) *Critical thinking*

It is no longer possible for an instructor to merely ask the student to study names, dates, events, theories, laws without addressing himself to the contradictions, distortions, inconsistencies, and lies for any number of reasons . . . (Bambara, "Part II" 15)

(3) *Magical thinking*

Of course anything outside this 'lab' was superstition, magic, barbarism, uncivilized. This trend in Western philosophy seems to be symptomatic of the mentality that produced great rationales for racist convictions and imperialist adventures. (Bambara, "Part II" 25)

(4) *Thinking is a physical activity*

[learning dance moves and history of the dance moves] (Bambara, "Part II" 26)

(5) *Teacher, not student, needs remediation*

Our ability to meet the needs of our students, depends to some extent on the remediation of our own education, which in most cases was patchy or inadequate in the above areas. (Rich, "Part I" 21)

(B) *In response to racist administration*

(1) *Racism in K-12*

Many of us worry about the fact that high school is where a tragic majority of Black

and Puerto Rican children drop out of sight: they leave school: because what happens to them in the classroom annihilates their rightful pride, and meets their earnest, real needs with nothing more than irrelevant and contemptuous instruction. (Jordan 31)

(2) *Education is meant to keep our children oppressed*

Today there is nothing wrong with the schools. The schools, as systems of elimination, are working perfectly well, and serving a purpose people should begin to wonder about. (Jordan 49)

(3) *Administrations defund successful anti-racist programs to ensure successful operations of racist systems*

a) Open Admissions and tuition

[T]he impending end of Open Admissions, the impending establishment of tuition requirements are, one and all, racist events that we cannot countenance, nor in any way accept. (Jordan 53)

b) Course loads

[I]t still seems clear that increasing the course load for each teacher is a sure way to undermine and devalue the quality which now exists. What is needed is the will to increase and encourage that quality—for the sake of the College as a whole and for the sake of the students we are purporting to serve. (Rich, “Part I” 22)

c) STIPENDS

There is a disparity between the education you can receive free of financial anxiety and hassles, with leisure for homework . . . WITHOUT STIPENDS FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS . . . A QUALITY EDUCATION IS STILL NOT BEING PROVIDED FOR ALL STUDENTS. (Rich, “Part I” 28)

d) Tokenism

“It will eventually guarantee a kind of tokenism which will admit large numbers of students only to betray and cheat them.” (Rich, qtd. in kaufman 4)

e) Budget

[detailed breakdown and critique of City’s budget] (Jordan 53)

f) Economics

We view the City of New York, and its Economics of People Extinction, as consistent with currently ruling national values, hatred, and demoralization. (Jordan 54)

Section II.09. Assessment

(A) Values

(How do you grade wisdom?) (Jordan 46) The wary student finds sanctuary in literature; the alert student prefers to respond to writings produced by his fellow classmates. (Bambara, “Part II” 4)

(B) Critical comments

No grades on papers—students voted against them in favor of critical comments. (Rich, “Part II” 15)

(C) Josh

But I feel they are somewhat prepared for their first English course if their enthusiasm for how and why language issued and what it can effect is anything to go by. (Bambara, “Part II” 8)

(D) Quality of thinking and feeling

Ultimately no piece of writing is going to be better than the quality of thinking and feeling that had led to its writing. This is as true for prison letters as for literacy criticism. (Rich, “Part I” 30)

Section II.10. Writing Styles and Genres in Archives

| | Audre Lorde | Toni Cade Bambara | June Jordan | Adrienne Rich |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| Writing Styles and Genres in Archives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syllabus • Teaching Journal • Notes that read like a long poem • Course Proposals • Outlines • Excerpt from novel | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essay in five parts that is itself a type of literacy narrative • Speech • Textual analysis resistant to MLA format • Report • Article • Open Letter | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Brief History of a neighborhood • Report • Professional letter • Public Speech with poetry • Graduation Speech • Poem essay • Essay • Statement to Board Heading | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memo to Students • Correspondence • Notes • Statements • Report • Glossary • Writing Exercises • Syllabus • Annotated Bibliography |

Section II.11 Places to Diverge

(A) Change in student populations

(1) *Students in 1969*

The students at this college have already indicated that they are weary of being lied to, tired of playing games, damned if they’ll be indoctrinated, programmed, ripped off any longer. (Bambara, “Part II” 15)

(2) *Students after No Child Left Behind and Common Core*

The students at the public university where I teach are earnest and well-behaved, minus some troubling cell phone addictions here and there. They enjoy the challenge of learning how to play games that don’t require electricity together in a classroom and appreciate pedagogy that provides a critical lens for analyzing the possibility that they are being “indoctrinated, programmed, and ripped off” as they go deeper in debt

as our campus becomes more diverse. They write brilliant essays analyzing television shows, movies, music videos, video games, and novels for deeper meaning after studying literary/film criticism. They thrive in well-structured and kind pedagogies of freedom and value our library field trips to learn how to take a book out of and navigate the stacks.

- (3) *Students Fall 2020*
Yet to be known.

Conclusion

As we engage the above poetics to enrich our pedagogy, the most important takeaway is to resist teaching the literacy narrative as a genre. To do so gets in the way of the liberatory work it wants to accomplish. Our poetics outlines strategies for two-way learning in composition classes to transform the university while historicizing the approach in 1960s and 1970s Harlem. This dynamic historical moment that is foundational to many FYW commonplaces has a lot to teach us in 2020 when similar historical forces are afoot and as many universities continue the patterns of defunding FYW programs as student populations become more diverse and need more individual support from their writing instructors. At the same time, calls for anti-racist social justice reform can literally be heard on our streets.

Proper support for doing our work is essential. When FYW directors and teachers are fighting university policies that undermine the ability to support their students, it takes a toll on the workers' bodies. Mina Shaughnessy, director of SEEK, died of stomach cancer at the age of 54 in 1978. That was the same year Audre Lorde was diagnosed with breast cancer, which later spread to the liver and led to her death in 1992 at the age of 58. Toni Cade Bambara died of colon cancer in 1995 at the age of 56. June Jordan died of breast cancer in 2002 at the age of 65. Adrienne Rich died due to complications from rheumatoid arthritis in 2012 at the age of 83. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs scathingly points out, "An institution knows how to preserve itself and it knows that Black feminists are a trouble more useful as dead invocation than as live troublemakers, raising concerns in faculty meetings" ("The Shape of My Impact").

At the time of this writing in July 2020, due to the enormous mishandling of a global pandemic by the federal government under the administration of the 45th president, universities are making investments in technology and cuts to labor that may have the most damaging impact to our FYW programs and our libraries—foundations for student literacy and essential for addressing the racist education and economic policies many of our students live through—while at the same time university and department statements on anti-racism proliferate.

Now is the time for all of us with social justice and anti-racist agendas (in word *and* action) to historicize our composition pedagogies within: economic policies of free tuition, student stipends, small classes, polyphonic cohorts of full-time instructors with contracts that can resist budgetary whims of corporate consulting companies, manageable course loads, and curricula that allow our students to change our perspectives as we continue to change theirs. The future is ours to shape.

NOTES

¹ See Tracie Morris, *Who Do With Words: (a blerd love tone manifesto)* (Chax Press, 2018) for a text that reads J. L. Austin through lenses of Black poetics and performance.

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